GAMBIT

CHESS FOR ZEBRAS

Thinking Differently about Black and White

Jonathan Rowson

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First published in the UK by Gambit Publications Ltd 2005
Reprinted 2006

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A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication data is available from the British Library.

ISBN 1 901983 85 4

DISTRIBUTION:
Worldwide (except USA): Central Books Ltd, 99 Wallis Rd, London E9 5LN.
Tel +44 (0)20 8986 4854 Fax +44 (0)20 8533 5821. E-mail: orders@Centralbooks.com
USA: Continental Enterprises Group, Inc., 302 West North 2nd Street, Seneca, SC 29678, USA.

For all other enquiries (including a full list of all Gambit chess titles) please contact the publishers, Gambit Publications Ltd, 6 Bradmore Park Rd, Hammersmith, London W6 0DS, England.
E-mail: info@gambitbooks.com
Or visit the GAMBIT web site at http://www.gambitbooks.com

Edited by Graham Burgess
Typeset by Petra Nunn
Printed in Great Britain by The Cromwell Press, Trowbridge, Wilts.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Dedication:
To Shiva, who helps me find the taste in water.

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Symbols

+	check
++	double check
#	checkmate
!!	brilliant move
!	good move
!?	interesting move
?!	dubious move
?	bad move
??	blunder
Ch	championship
1-0	the game ends in a win for White
½-½	the game ends in a draw
0-1	the game ends in a win for Black
(D)	see next diagram

Small superscript numbers in the text refer to the Endnotes, which may be found on pages 252-3.

Acknowledgements

Various students have helped me to form my views on the challenges and possibilities of chess improvement. These include Gordon Rattray, who allowed me to use his games as material, and introduced the idea of 'The Lazy Detective'. Carey Thiel was also very generous in allowing me to use material from his games and from our lessons together. Sebastian Gueler kindly translated some of Robert Hübner's writings to help me understand his critique of Kasparov's 3-dimensional model of chess. Alan Dunn's verbal description of his own thoughts helped me to begin to write Chapter 3. Richard Edgar offered some great examples of 'psycho-logic' and many interesting thoughts about chess improvement, while Daniel Vanheirzeele reminded me how much pleasure chess teaching can be. Nathan Goldberg consistently challenged my views on improvement with humour and panache, in addition to letting me use material from our lessons.

Many strong players have given useful thoughts or material that have appeared in various places throughout the book, including: Glenn Flear, John Shaw, Nigel Davies, Jon Speelman, Keith Arkell, Alexander Baburin and Jacob Aagaard.

Artur Yusupov made me understand the importance of calculation in chess, and his very succinct account of White's advantage helped me to structure the material in Part 3.

Julian Hodgson gave me his game against Yermolinsky (Chapter 6) which I would not otherwise have known about. *En passant*, although Julian played a massive indirect role in *Seven Deadly Chess Sins*, I forgot to thank him explicitly in the acknowledgements. Now that I am little older and a little stronger, it is clear to me that I have learned more about practical chess from Julian than I have from any other single player (although it cost me several points in the process).

Robert Hübner is the most modest intellectual giant that I know. The hours we spent talking about chess in France earlier this year were extremely instructive for me. Although I am sure you will be horrified by the more obscure ideas in this book, I hope some of your lucidity has rubbed off on me too.

Paul Motwani was helpful in a variety of ways, including general encouragement, offering comments to his games that were used here and giving his early thoughts on functional assessments. The readers will have to wait until another book to know what you meant when you said: "Paul sans crises des temps est un cube parfait!"

Luke McShane is the new Julian Hodgson for me, in the sense of being a player who continually teaches me things about chess without really trying to. Several of Luke's games are featured in this book, and he has given invaluable insights into all of them, and more. Luke is also partly responsible for the title of this book and was the first to approve of it, on a train ride to Kilkenny in 2001.

I am hugely grateful to Allan Beardsworth, who very generously offered to read through the entire book two weeks before I submitted it. During that time he gave extensive feedback and encouragement. Allan's attention to detail was remarkable and his probing queries have helped me to improve the clarity of explanation throughout the book.

A special thank you goes to Gerard O'Reilly, who has been with the project since its inception and has had to read some terrible earlier drafts, full of nonsense about striped equine mammals and ideology. There were many times when I wrote a section and felt that something wasn't quite right, and Gerard had the patience and perspicacity to understand what I was trying to say, explain why I needed to say it better, and then suggest how this might be done.

Gambit Publications were generous at the beginning, patient in the middle and persistent at the end. I am also grateful to them for believing in the title of the book, and I hope they are suitably rewarded.

As always, I appreciate the support of my family, including the welcome respite from chess writing offered by Shane, Ryan and Adam while I was living in Troon. As with my previous book, Shiva left me to my own devices when I most needed it, and her loving company has made the final stages of writing particularly enjoyable.

Finally, this book is written from a personal perspective. A large proportion of the examples chosen are from my own games. Some of these examples are wins that I am proud of, and many of them are losses that I learned from. Once you are a grandmaster, further improvement tends to be especially hard earned, and therefore all the more fulfilling. Although *Chess for Zebras* is not explicitly an account of how I have improved my own play, the discerning reader might detect this theme as a kind of sub-plot. Ten years ago, my FIDE rating was exactly 2400. Today I had hoped to tell a tidy story about gradually gaining 200 rating points over the course of the last decade. However, it seems that this story did not want to be told, for I discovered today that my new rating is 2599! I guess there is more work to be done...

It just remains for me to thank all of the above for their contribution to this book, and acknowledge my debt to them.

Thank you.

Jonathan Rowson
London
July 1st 2005

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Preface: Why Zebras?

When you hear hoof beats, think of a zebra
SUFI SAYING

If you are reading this book, you are very unlikely to be a zebra, if only because zebras can't read. Nor can they play chess. In the absence of literate chess-playing zebras, you may therefore be wondering whether my publishers misjudged their market when they accepted my proposal to write this book.

That remains to be seen, but the Sufi saying above highlights the value of the title. We associate hoof beats with horses because they are more familiar, but the injunction 'think of a zebra' is an important one. In chess, as in every sphere of life, we need to have some control of our reflexes and be mindful of our assumptions. 'Thinking of a zebra' therefore means being more open to experience and less constrained by convention. It means allowing yourself to think differently.

The theme of thinking differently unites the different parts of the book. Part 1 is a mini-sequel to *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins* (hereafter *7DCS*). There is no 'sin' in this book, but the emphasis on human idiosyncrasies remains. The first two chapters are about the importance of 'meaning-making' in the context of chess and a critique of some common-sense notions of chess improvement. This idea is developed in Chapters 3 and 4, where chess thinking is presented as a form of storytelling and myth-making – a truer account than the unreflective view of two rational agents forming plans and calculating variations. I end Part 1 with some ideas about the importance of concentration, and how to improve it.

Part 2 begins by reflecting on what makes chess so difficult, and focuses on the different kinds of thinking required in different phases of the game. Various aspects of positional play are covered, and I examine the attitudes necessary for successful defending, 'glorious grinding' and simple 'being'. In general, I have tried to select examples to illustrate that there is more to chess than opening theory and attacking, because I believe these aspects of the game receive a disproportionate amount of attention in chess publications.

Part 3 considers what is meant by 'theory' in chess, and explores whether Black has advantages to compensate for White's alleged first-move advantage. I do not make the audacious claim that Black is better, but I try to show why the issue of the first-move advantage is not as straightforward as a simple reading of the statistics might suggest. And then I share one of my favourite games, add a few final thoughts about zebras, and bid farewell to the reader.

So that's the book, but you may still be wondering about the title. I have been wondering about the title too, and in an effort to make sense of it I learned more about zebras than I ever thought I would need to know. When I started finding parallels between chess and zebras (there are many!) this preface became ten times longer, but without doing my title any favours. Then I remembered that my failure to capture the zebra factor has a parallel in the outside world.

If you try to lasso a zebra it will watch you, then the rope as it comes closer and closer, seemingly mesmerized. You will think that you have it, but at the last possible moment it will without fail dart away, leaving you baffled, with a long rope to fill your empty hands. I realized that I was trying too hard. I enjoyed thinking about chess in the context of zebras, but the role of the title was to encourage readers to 'think differently', not to create an exotic new branch of zoology.

So most of the material on zebras did not make the final cut. I decided there was no need to strain to justify a title that I simply liked, and that others seemed to like too. If nothing else, '*Chess for Zebras*' has resonance with the late Simon Webb's popular classic, *Chess for Tigers*, and therefore wasn't completely without precedent. However, I also felt that *Chess for Zebras* is pleasingly absurd, and therefore makes the point about 'thinking differently' more directly than all the chapters put together.

Part 1: Improving Our Capacity to Improve

In the last few years I have been teaching players of varying ages and strengths and have learned a lot in the process. With most of my adult students, the nature of their shortcomings becomes fairly clear to me after a few lessons, and this leads me to propose some possible remedies. A few weeks later I often hear about a great success, and they show me how they applied something they have learned, or something they were tempted to do before catching themselves in the act and doing something better. At this stage I am encouraged by the progress, and the lessons continue. Then a little time passes and I notice the old familiar mistakes coming back, as does the student. But when I remark that I thought these problems had already been dealt with, the student is as bewildered as I am, and can only say: "I know, I know..."

I have consulted several respected chess teachers of varied strengths, nationalities and temperaments, and the verdict that sustained and significant improvement is elusive for the vast majority of adult players has been virtually unanimous. Most of these teachers felt that the problem is primarily lack of application, and that your average amateur chess-player just doesn't have enough time to work on their chess, no matter how devoted they are to improving. In this context, the teacher can only do so much, and the student cannot realistically expect to make big strides if he doesn't work on his game away from lessons.

Once the problem is framed in this way the solution is simple: if you want to improve your chess, you need to make more time for chess, and work harder. While I think there is some truth in this characterization of the problem, I now think that the solution is misleading. Certainly, time constraints are relevant, and the more time you have to devote to chess improvement, the more likely you are to improve. However, I know many players who seem to do everything they possibly can to improve: they toil to get their openings in shape, pay lots of money to have coaches look at their games, work on their endings enough to know their Lucenas from their Philidors, and diligently study their own game in all the ways they are supposed to, but without great success. Many even strive to diagnose their chess problems precisely and focus on the areas that seem to be most in need of attention, but even in these cases, significant improvement is quite rare. So what is going on?

My impression is that 'the improvement problem' is more subtle than simply lacking the time to do the necessary work. I now have the impression that after your rating stabilizes at a certain level it is rare for this level to change significantly, regardless of the *amount* of effort you put in. However, I think it is possible to improve with a different *kind* of effort, and the first part of this book explains why and how this might be so. The core idea is that aspiring players should place much more emphasis on developing their skill than increasing their knowledge. This means that chess work should be less focused on 'learning', and more about 'training' and 'practising' whereby you force yourself to think[1].

The five chapters that follow grew out of these impressions. Chapters 1 and 2 provide some psychological and pedagogical background to make sense of what chess improvement might entail, and then Chapters 3 and 4 build on this with a view of chess that places human idiosyncrasies at the heart of the game, and therefore at the heart of our attempts to get better at it. Although I do give

some guidelines for improvement along the way, these first four chapters are mainly diagnostic, while Chapter 5 gives some more explicit guidance on how to play better chess.

Before reading on, I would like it to be known that I don't pretend to have given a final answer to the perennial question "How can I improve?". Part 1 is better understood as a description of 'the improvement problem' and some early steps to a solution. What follows is not a recipe for a higher rating, but a set of ideas based on my own experience of improvement, a theory of the way we learn, and my current understanding of what playing good chess involves. One way to improve your capacity to improve is to consider the following five chapters carefully, and if I were to sum up the message they contain in one line it would be this: **improvement begins at the edge of your comfort zone**.

1 What to Do When You Think There is a Hole in Your Bucket

Are you familiar with the song "*There's a hole in my bucket*"? I hadn't thought about it for about twenty years, but I recently heard it with adult ears and it struck me as rather profound. It's a duet by 'Henry' and 'Liza' and goes like this:

There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza
There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, a hole!

Then mend it, dear Henry, dear Henry, dear Henry
Then mend it, dear Henry, dear Henry, mend it!

With what shall I mend it? dear Liza, dear Liza
With what shall I mend it dear Liza, with what?

The song proceeds with Liza proposing a straw, but Henry says that the straw is too long. Then Liza proposes that Henry cut the straw and Henry enquires how he might do this. Liza suggests an axe, but, alas, the axe is too blunt. Liza says he should sharpen this axe, and, after Henry's habitual query, advises that this should be done with a stone. But Henry says the stone is too dry, so Liza says he should wet it. Then Henry asks how he can wet it and Liza proposes water, but then Henry, thinking of how he might get this water, and never short of a pertinent question, asks:

In what shall I carry it, dear Liza, dear Liza?
In what shall I carry it, dear Liza, with what?

Alas, Liza seems to miss the point:

In a bucket, dear Henry, dear Henry, dear Henry!
In a bucket dear Henry, dear Henry, in a bucket!

And then (you'll have seen this coming) ...
But there's a hole in my bucket! dear Liza, dear Liza
But there's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, a hole!

This sweet song has hidden depths, unlike Henry's bucket. Henry's apparently simple difficulty turns out to be complex, and becomes a sort of Catch-22 situation in which the problem can be solved only if it doesn't exist. An essential condition for solving Henry's problem (fetching water to wet the stone to sharpen the axe to cut the straw to plug the hole in the bucket) can be fulfilled (literally!) only if the problem doesn't exist (i.e. if the bucket has no hole).

Henry is like the aspiring chess-player and Liza is the well-meaning chess teacher. When Henry pleads: "But there's a hole in my bucket!" He could equally be saying: "But I'm not learning anything!" Liza has given him lots of good advice but somehow nothing changes. Henry keeps coming back with a problem that seems fixable and Liza keeps fixing it, but soon Henry is back at square one, no doubt feeling frustrated, while Liza, it would seem, doesn't know what to do.

On a metaphorical level, the water Henry needs is the knowledge we seek, and the hole in his bucket represents the problems we have in finding it. Henry's ability to carry water seems to be circumscribed by the limitations of his bucket, just as our ability to absorb and

understand new chess ideas is limited by our cognitive resources. You could have access to a gushing waterfall, but be unable to capture the water because of a hole in your bucket. Likewise, you could have the time and money to read all the best chess books, have lessons with the finest teachers and analyse with the most advanced computer programs, but what you learn will be heavily influenced by your cognitive 'instruments' like memory, emotion, reason, language, perceptual and nervous system, etc. – the things that determine how you take the information in, and make sense of it.

However, the laborious process that Liza puts Henry through and the fact that the hole is never 'fixed' suggests that Henry and Liza may be looking in the wrong place for a way out of their predicament. Our minds do have 'holes' in the sense that they have limitations, but I think the problem that the song alludes to is much deeper. The reason our minds cannot be 'filled' is not because they have 'holes', but because they are not at all like buckets. The common-sense view of learning is that we learn by 'filling up' our heads with things, as if our heads were buckets and we learned by filling the bucket with knowledge. But we now know that this crude spatial view of the mind is misleading, and that learning is a much more complex process. In light of this, Henry and Liza's impasse becomes much more meaningful.

Together they have misunderstood the problem. They could spend years trying to fix the hole (they are probably still at it), without ever realizing that the problem is not with the hole but with the bucket. A more fruitful answer to Henry's plea "But there's a hole in my bucket!" is not the early twentieth-century solution of accepting the bucket and trying to fix the hole, but something more radical. A twentieth-first century solution would mean Liza helping Henry to break the patterns that bind him:

There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza
There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, a hole!

Your mind is not a bucket, dear Henry, dear Henry
Your mind is not a bucket, dear Henry, a bucket.

But there's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, dear Liza
There's a hole in my bucket, dear Liza, a hole.

Get over your bucket! Dear Henry, dear Henry
Get over your bucket! Dear Henry, get over it!

But how will I fetch knowledge, dear Liza, dear Liza
How will I fetch knowledge, dear Liza, to improve?

Your knowledge is not fetched, dear Henry, dear Henry
You knowledge is not fetched, dear Henry, it is constructed.

I suspect that last line would silence Henry, at which point they might actually be getting somewhere. Henry probably wouldn't know what Liza meant by 'constructed' but now that he has been snapped out of his most limiting assumption, he might start asking more fruitful questions.

Learning and Unlearning

We perceive. This is a hard fact. But what we perceive is not a fact of the same kind, because we learn what to perceive.
CARLOS CASTANEDA

Any theory about how the mind thinks or learns should be considered with due care, because thinking and learning are highly idiosyncratic processes and difficult to model without violating their inherent complexity. However, I think we do know some things about how the mind *doesn't* work that are useful, and we can make some intelligent guesses about what this means

for our attempts to understand chess and the process of chess improvement.

Our common-sense view is that minds are spaces ready to be filled with new chess positions, and the chess improvement industry relies on this notion to sell their products, albeit inadvertently. However, our minds cannot be 'filled' at all. New information does not follow a seamless path to a comfortable destination. Chess ideas do not just slot into unfurnished apartments ready to unpack. On the contrary, they are smothered by the assistance of related ideas and arrive in a heavily furnished place, often nursing wounds from the battles they have waged with old ideas on their way out.

The heart of the matter is that chess understanding involves using a highly imperfect instrument, namely you, who will use what you already know about chess to make the chess material you are trying to assimilate meaningful to you. **To put it more technically, we *construct* our understanding of positions, which means using what we have, however imperfect, to make sense of what we are given.** We con (with) struct (structure) our understanding. We learn 'with-structure'. Which structure? This varies from person to person, but it includes the bio-chemical one we were born with, and the vast psycho-socio-cultural one we have unwittingly and idiosyncratically built over the course of our whole lives.

So, if what we have (i.e. our current chess understanding) has lots of in-built biases, hubris and painful memories, it will directly affect the quality of what we read or think in an effort to improve our game. This means that **real** learning is often a painful process, because you are not just collecting new ideas and stacking them up in some sort of expanding cognitive warehouse. It means that learning is hard, because you have to unlearn so many of the things that made sense to you. It means that learning needs resilience, because things won't always make sense straight away and you might have to be willing to feel stupid or ignorant before things begin to clarify again at a higher level. Indeed, I have come to believe that **the kind of learning that is most useful for chess improvement is actually 'unlearning'**.

I imagine that this will sound troubling for most readers. When you are desperate to improve you want to be going forward, to be growing and learning new things. You don't want to be dwelling on all your bad habits and looking backwards to those painful losses, or facing up to the fact that the opening ideas that you once loved so dearly no longer serve you well. However, if you have certain modes of thinking about chess, and strong attachments to certain structures, openings, styles of play, etc., then this will act as a kind of limiting filter for the new material you are trying to learn. You may be able to pick up the odd new idea and make minor improvements by learning new things, but real strides will only come about when you take a close look at yourself as the system that is trying to make sense of all this material. As humans we don't have the option of changing our system, but what we do have is the capacity for meta-cognition, i.e. to think about our thinking. This may be damaging during our games because it is liable to confuse us, and distract us from the competitive task at hand, but between games, when we are thinking about how to improve, it can be very useful. Once we start thinking meta-cognitively, there is much more chance that we will begin to self-correct some of our more limiting assumptions. Hopefully, we will then have fewer blockages and become better and more efficient thinkers.

So unlearning is really a way of constantly looking at the baggage you bring to chess positions and trying to work on the baggage that is most obviously problematic. It is also a way of trying to look at chess positions with fresh eyes, as free as possible from prejudices. When you succeed in doing this, you start to see the prejudices as prejudices, and not as absolute truths, and that's when real improvement becomes easier.

I should say here that this kind of unlearning is extremely difficult, because it is natural to want to make sense of things, and to impose order on chaos with rules and categories and arguments. We do this in chess by making judgements about moves and positions. Moreover, whenever we stop to do this we tend to feel uncomfortable, and my impression is that this is

because real thinking is uncomfortable, at least at first[2]. Going through the motions and applying what you know about the game is all very well, but this will usually mean that, at least at some point in the game, your judgement will have been superficial. When you try to surrender your dearly held notions of what chess is like and start to try to work things out at the board, it is initially quite distressing to realize that it doesn't really make much sense at all. Only later, when you realize that chess is unfathomably deep and complicated, do significant changes start to take place. This reminds me of one of my favourite Zen aphorisms, which I have adapted here for our purposes:

When you know what you know, bishops are bishops, knights are knights, and pawns are pawns.

When you start to unlearn, bishops are no longer bishops, knights are no longer knights, and pawns are no longer pawns.

When you feel the benefit of unlearning, bishops are again bishops, knights are again knights, and pawns are again pawns.

That's a nice thought, I can imagine you thinking, but how is it supposed to work? If all I do is 'unlearn' a lot of supposedly unhelpful ideas that I bring to chess, don't I need to replace them with something new? This question is still based on the idea of your mind as a bucket to be filled, with the implicit idea that the dirty old water being thrown out will be replaced by fresh new water. As I've said, and will continue to show, your mind is not like a bucket and knowledge is not like water. Moreover, unlearning does not mean rejecting. The idea of unlearning is rather to see what you have learned as learned, and therefore as constructed and fallible, rather than as factual and irreplaceable. Unlearning does help you improve, because the process requires you to look at chess carefully, while considering the way you are trying to make sense of the game. This alone will not add to your knowledge of the game, and it will not 'replace' whatever habits of mind are being examined, but rather develop and improve those habits. The idea of unlearning is to see your habits of mind *as habits*, and therefore to have more self-control during play. This will markedly increase your skill level, and the following two sections should make some sense of how this works, and why it is so important.

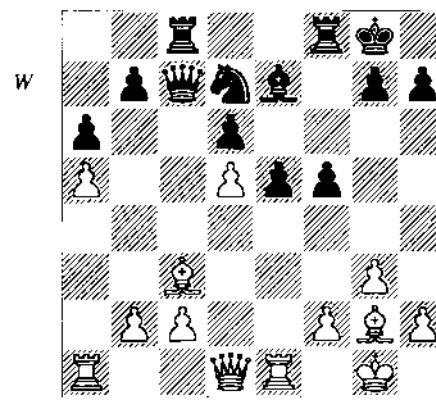
Hindsight and Foresight

Hindsight explains the injury that foresight would have prevented.
ANONYMOUS

The following game took place in the later stages of the Istanbul Olympiad 2000. I had been having quite a gruelling event, struggling to score against 2600+ opposition. In this game my opponent was rated around 2500 (as I was at the time) and since I had White, I told myself that this was my chance to win a game.

Rowson – Wu Shaobin
Istanbul Olympiad 2000

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 e6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘c6 5 ♘c3 ♕c7 6 g3 a6 7 ♗g2 d6 8 0-0 ♗d7 9 a4 ♘f6 10 ♘xc6 ♗xc6 11 a5 ♗e7 12 ♗e3 ♖c8 13 ♖e1 ♘d7 14 ♗d4 0-0 15 ♘d5 ♗xd5 16 exd5 e5 17 ♗c3 f5 *(D)*



Take a few minutes to consider the position before reading on.

Some of you will think a general thought like "White has two bishops and more space" and then conclude that White must be better. Some of you might focus on one thing, perhaps not

very significant, but judge it as significant and then build your thoughts around it. For instance, you might think that White has a weak pawn on a5 so he shouldn't move his rook from a1. More adventurous spirits might be yearning to move the black queen from c7 so that the ...♖xc3 exchange sacrifice becomes possible and then direct your attention to White trying to avoid this. Others might feel rather uninspired by the whole thing and say, "It's about equal" and plod along with a pointless move like 18 ♕d2. Some of you may notice the e-file and wonder about f4 possibilities. Some of you might be worried (on White's behalf) about the idea of ...f4 and the opening of the f-file. Others will barely consider this because it weakens the light squares. Stronger players might not even *see* it, because it is filtered out by a discerning unconscious.

Think over your appraisal, and ask yourself where your ideas came from. Which mental resources are you using to make sense of this position? Does it remind you of anything? Are you free to think about this position in any way you choose, or do you find your thoughts coming back to the same issues, again and again? I have shown this position to several of my students and have found their thoughts highly instructive.

A rusty 1900 player became fixated with the idea of putting a bishop on e6 to fork the rook and king, and wasted a big chunk of energy trying to make it work. He ruefully stated "there is no way through", as if there might have been, but this seemed to me to be an absurd place to start your train of thought. Yet it wasn't voluntary, it was just what his perceptual system focused on, for whatever reason, as soon as he saw the position. Another student was uncomfortable about the weakness of the b6-square, and the fact that the queen had to watch over it. Another, rated around 2100, initially felt that White must be better, because of the pawn-structure. He singled out the d5- and a5-pawns compared to the weakness of b7 and d6. He also felt that f4 might be 'necessary' but the more he looked at the position, the more it became clear to him that White was rather short of good ideas.

Now the truth, as I understand it, is that Black has a significant advantage. I was in poor form at the 2000 Olympiad and when I played into this position I had hoped that I would have a move other than 17 ♗c3. Of course this is asking for trouble, and **when I am playing well, 'hope', being outside my sphere of influence, plays no part in my thinking**. Even so, when I had seen this position in advance, it seemed promising to me, even with ♗c3. I had visions of opening the position with c4-c5, meeting ...f4 with ♗h3, meeting ...e4 with f3 and if Black took on f3 and played ...♘e5 I would take on e5, play d6 and 'break through'. However, mostly I was working on the assumption that my two bishops and space advantage ought to count for something. Only on closer inspection did my initial assessment fall down.

I suspect that most GMs might find my misjudgement surprising because it doesn't take long for a strong player to see that it is much easier to play Black in this position. However, I didn't look hard enough at the position in advance, and appreciate that the awkward placement of my bishop on c3 was indeed unavoidable. Moreover, far from being a minor detail, this feature of the position is a serious impediment. Black is better, mainly because White has no sensible plan. Black has a mobile kingside majority, while White's majority is stifled, and most importantly, Black has a clear plan of exchanging dark-squared bishops by playing ...♗f6 and ...e4. If White had his c-pawn on c4, protected by a pawn on b3, he would have a reasonable position, but because of the placement of the bishop on c3, he is suffering. It takes quite a high level of positional discernment to realize just how much difference this makes, but the strongest player to comment on this position, Luke McShane, almost immediately homed in on this aspect of the position. I asked simply: "What do you think about this position?" He replied: "Not sure, but the bishop on c3 looks a bit funny."

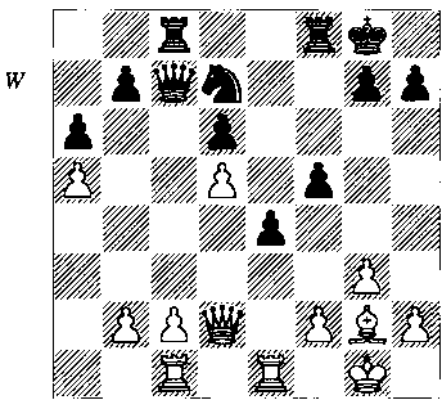
The essence of the position is that I can't do anything unless I can play c4, and I can't play c4 because my bishop is on c3. And I can't move my c3-bishop because it protects c2 so I need to play ♖c1, which allows ...♗g5 and the

immediate exchange of dark-squared bishops. White is not lost here, but the only way to avoid a gradual unravelling is to put a defensive hat on, and make sure the position doesn't get any worse. However, this is easier said than done, especially when you start from the erroneous assumption that you have the advantage!

18 ♖c1

I looked for more creative approaches to the position, but such a position can only yield so much. For instance, 18 ♖a4!? ♗f6 19 ♗f1 e4 20 ♖c4 ♕b8 21 ♗xf6 ♖xf6 22 ♖xc8+ ♕xc8 23 c4 ♘e5 24 ♗e2 looks like it might be approaching equality, but after 24...f4 it is clear that Black is in the driving seat.

18...♗g5 19 ♗d2 ♗xd2 20 ♕xd2 e4! *(D)*



Without doing anything special, merely by reacting to my moves, Black has taken control of the game. This is relevant to Part 3 of the book, for I feel this is often how Black takes control of a game, simply by reacting well, and also how White loses control of the game, by trying to make something happen (15 ♘d5) before the position warrants it.

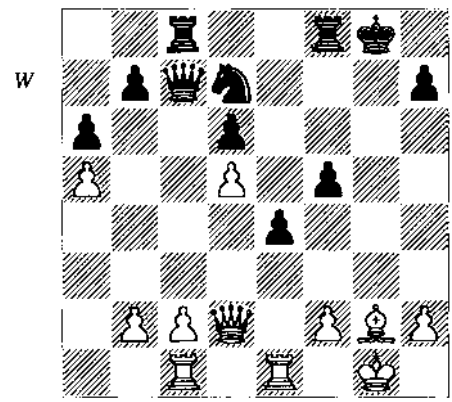
In any case, I was in a pugnacious mood, and wasn't ready to accept that I was worse, so I now had a long think with a view to regaining the initiative.

21 g4?

Such a weakening move was not undertaken lightly, but I became desperate when I couldn't find an answer to the positional threat of ...♘e5 (threatening ...♘c4, which cannot be prevented by b3 due to the dominating ...♕c3). This lunge seemed the best practical try, but I didn't really believe it at the time. I should have accepted that things had gone wrong more than I did. Indeed, I think I was a bit guilty of self-deception, in that I now knew I was worse, but somehow pretended that I had it covered.

As if often the case, the most natural move is probably best here: 21 c4! ♘e5 22 ♖e3! ♘d3 (22...b6!? 23 axb6 ♕xb6 keeps a comfortable edge for Black, but it won't be easy to break through without allowing White's bishop into the game) 23 ♖c3 ♕c5 (23...♕xa5? 24 ♖cxd3!) 24 f4!. This last move is an important resource, and I owe it to Fritz. It's hard to imagine a human mind voluntarily giving Black a protected passed pawn and inviting the enormous knight to d3, but Fritz 'sees' without such thought constructs. While we think in terms of protected passed pawns and 'octopus' knights (as Raymond Keene referred to such a creature on d3) the silicon monster sees only variations (in this case cutting away variations where the knight retreats to e5). Now if 24...b6, 25 ♗f1 and White is starting to fight back.

21...g6! 22 gxf5 gxf5 *(D)*



I was hoping that the g-file would give me some counterplay and that my bishop could pretend to be active by attacking f5, but in fact the opening of the kingside only makes me more vulnerable to attack. The old 'rule', 'don't play on the side of the board where you are weaker' very much applied here.

23 ♖e3 ♘e5 24 c4 ♔h8 25 ♔h1 ♕g7 26 ♖g3 ♕f6 27 ♗f1 f4 28 ♖g2 ♖g8 29 ♕d4 ♖xg2 30

♗xg2 f3 31 ♗f1 ♖g8 32 ♖e1 ♕g5 33 ♗h3 ♕h4 34 ♗f1 ♕g4 0-1

So what should one do with such a game? The most direct lesson concerns tournament psychology. Since playing this game I have noticed the following countless times: after playing a string of stronger players you come up against somebody with a rating similar or slightly below your own and you make the mistake of thinking of them as weak, and a chance for you to regain the ground you lost against the big guys. However, often these intended victims are only weak relative to your previous opponents, not relative to you! If you don't take them seriously on their own terms there is a big risk of losing further ground.

However, the main reason I chose to show this game, and my students' reactions to it, is because I think it illustrates the gap between our guiding principles (two bishops, space, structure) and stories running through our heads about what ought to be happening (I should win this game, I should therefore be better, I should therefore look for lines where I emerge with the advantage) and the positional and competitive reality (I am probably worse, not better, and I have no particular right to win this game).

A further reason I like this example is that once you realize Black is better after move 17, it is easy to say that 15 ♘d5 was a mistake. With hindsight, we know how the game developed, and that White was struggling to equalize. This gives us a better understanding of that position. However, I believe that this piece of knowledge will have a negligible impact on one's chess development. **What is needed in chess is not this sort of *hindsight*, where everything makes sense, but *foresight*, where we see such positions coming and can assess them more accurately.** My impression is that most chess improvement literature leads us to believe that one should follow from the other, but I think this is false, and perhaps the main reason adult improvement is so rare. Most instructional manuals, from Nimzowitsch onwards, teach us about positions with the benefit of hindsight (e.g. here is what happens when an isolated pawn is blockaded). **The problem, as I understand it, is that such hindsight might give chess-players *knowledge* but what we need is foresight** (e.g. will the blockade be secure? what else will be happening in that position?) **and although foresight might be developed, it is not easy to 'teach', because it is a question of *skill*[3].**

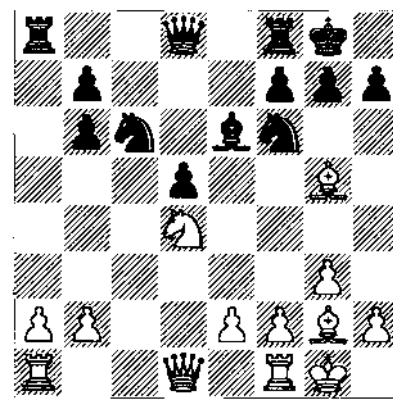
Fear not, improvement is possible, and skill can be developed, but keep this distinction between knowledge and skill in mind while considering the following game.

Tal – Keres

Candidates tournament, Bled/Zagreb/Belgrade 1959

1 ♘f3 d5 2 d4 c5 3 c4 e6 4 cxd5 exd5 5 g3 ♘c6 6 ♗g2 ♘f6 7 0-0 ♗e7 8 ♘c3 0-0 9 ♗g5 ♗e6 10 dxc5 ♗xc5 11 ♘a4 ♗b6 12 ♘xb6 axb6 13 ♘d4 *(D)*

B



"The position that has now arisen might seem at first glance to be much more favourable for White than it really is. He enjoys the advantage of the two bishops and controls the important d4-square, whilst his opponent's pawn-structure contains marked weaknesses on the queenside. However, if one tries to suggest a plan by which White can increase his supposed advantage, then one is pulled up sharp by unexpected difficulties. It becomes apparent that Black's position too contains various advantages that should not be underestimated. In the first place he has good development, a pawn in the centre which controls the important e4-square and finally his rooks

will become very active along the many open files. I am therefore far from convinced that White is in possession of any advantage worth mentioning..." – Paul Keres.

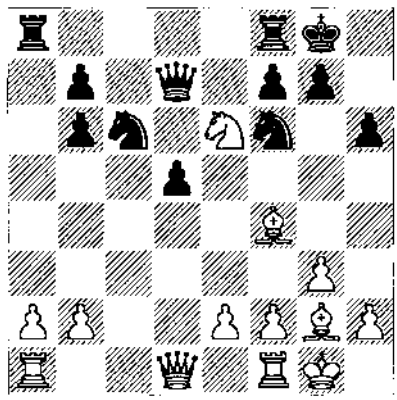
13...h6 14 ♗f4 ♕d7

Now White has to dig deep and find a way to take the initiative. According to Keres best play now gives White an edge but I think it would take a strong and flexible player to appreciate which transformation was required here.

15 a3?

Vague. Tal seems to make the mistake of expecting his positional trumps to do all the work themselves, when in this position he is the one who has to make things happen. Freeing the rook from the defence of the a-pawn is useful but it seems that it was more important to prevent Black's main idea, which is to exchange light-squared bishops, weaken White's kingside, and take firmer control of the e4-square. The difficulty for White in such positions lies in not knowing what kind of advantage to play for. Having the better structure and two bishops is all very well, but this is not a position where 'being' is enough; it is necessary to do something (see Chapter 8). White should address Black's positional threat of ...♗h3, which improves his position considerably. One way to do this is the relatively passive 15 ♖e1, but after 15...♗h3 16 ♗h1 ♖fe8 the position is still very tense. Much more effective is 15 ♘xe6! *(D)*, changing the nature of the game considerably.

B



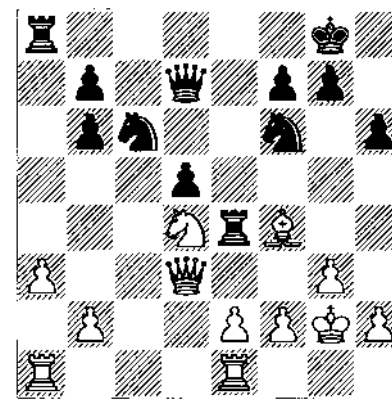
Black will no longer have an IQP, and his so-called 'bad bishop' has been exchanged, but White still has the better structure and a longer-term advantage of the two bishops versus two knights. More to the point, he can immediately create threats that are not so easy to deal with. Then:

a) 15...♕xe6!? is worth considering because White will have some difficulty attacking and controlling the IQP. After 16 ♕d3 ♖fe8 17 ♖fe1 ♘e4 White is probably still somewhat better, but Black also has things to be happy about.

b) 15...fxe6 16 ♕b3! gives Black some immediate problems to solve. 16...e5!? is the obvious reply, but now the centre is a little tender. 17 ♗e3! (17 ♗d2 ♘d4 18 ♕d1 ♕b5 19 e3 ♘c6 might still be better for White, but Black's position is very active) 17...♘a5 18 ♕xb6 ♘c4 19 ♕b3 and White has won a pawn for insufficient compensation. Perhaps Black has to be more modest and play 16...♖a6 but White retains some advantage, even if all three results are still possible.

15...♗h3 16 ♕d3 ♖fe8 17 ♖fe1 ♗xg2 18 ♔xg2 ♖e4! *(D)*

W

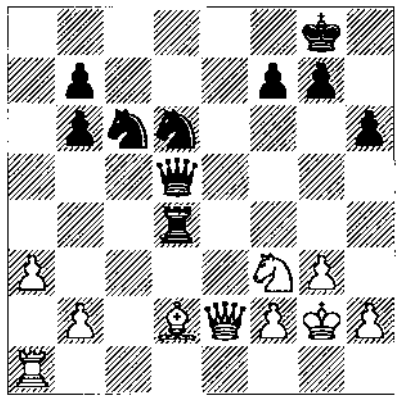


How things have changed! White's king has been weakened, he no longer has the two bishops and Black's excellent control of d4 and pressure on the e-file give Black the more comfortable game.

19 ♘f3 ♖ae8 20 ♗d2 d4!

Gaining space and creating new possibilities for the black queen.

21 e3 ♕d5 22 exd4 ♖xd4 23 ♖xe8+ ♘xe8 24 ♕e2 ♘d6 *(D)*



Black's centralization is admirable and White has an awful lot of knight hops to think about. The only thing sub-optimal about Black's position is his queenside structure, but because he has the initiative, that is not such a big issue.

On a personal note, it is instructive for me that Black's activity really counts for something here. I think that one of my weaknesses as a player is a lack of respect for active pieces, and the danger they bring. I should confess that if I were to have seen the variation leading to this position from a few moves previously I would have been inclined to think that White was at least OK here and even had chances to be better. Now that the position is in front of me I can feel that this is mistaken, but I think the reason I would have done this is understandable, and speaks to the distinction between knowledge and skill.

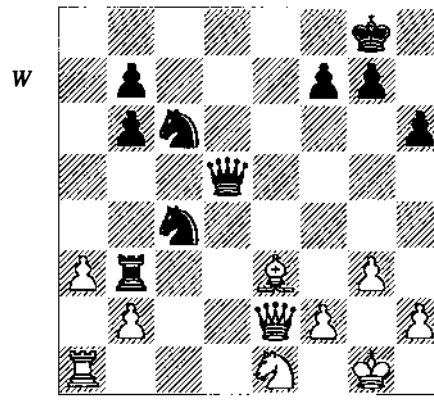
The bishop vs knight imbalance and doubled b-pawns would have been flagged as the most important issues in my mind in foresight, because the relevance of these imbalances is something that I know. It is much harder to latch on to the significance of a notion like 'activity' and appreciate the relevance of, for example, the queen pinning the knight on f3, when this is something that can be changed in one move. Successfully comparing Black's activity with the structural and minor-piece imbalance requires a high level of skill, and a feeling for chess that cannot be readily verbalized.

When I reach the position after 24...♘d6 I can see that things are not so clear, but I still feel that White is OK. Only with hindsight, after seeing the rest of the game, do I appreciate that Black is better here. Studying this game gives me a little knowledge of the relative importance of temporary and dynamic factors, but only a very marginal impact on my level of skill. For that to change I would need many more examples, and it would help if I had to solve them rather than read about them.

25 ♗e3 ♖d3 26 ♔g1 ♘c4 27 ♘e1

27 ♖c1 ♘xb2 is a problem.

27...♖b3 *(D)*



Black's pressure has assumed definite proportions and White has no choice but to make a structural concession.

28 ♖c1

28 ♖d1 ♖xb2!.

28...♘xe3 29 fxe3 ♕e5!

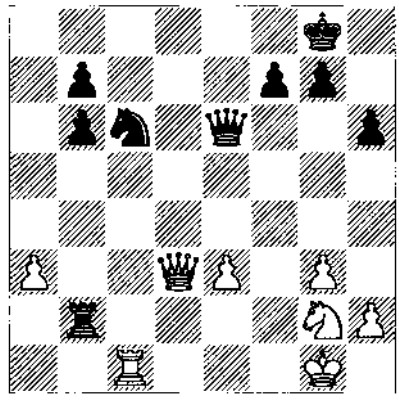
A double attack that wins a pawn by force. Black now has a clear advantage.

30 ♘g2

30 ♘d3 ♕e4 is no improvement for White, because 31 ♖d1 ♘d4! is deadly.

30...♖xb2 31 ♕d3 ♕e6!? *(D)*

An interesting decision – Black threatens ...♖b3 and seeks the exchange of rooks. The problem with White's structure is not just the weakness of the e-pawn but the fact that his king has been exposed by the loss of the f-pawn (White's 'box' has been compromised – see Chapter 7 under 'Safety'). This means that the queen and knight combination will be difficult for the white king to deal with. It is important to realize that this is a practical decision and that it



is also entirely possible to keep the rooks on, for instance by starting with 31...b5 intending ...b4. However, in that case White can perhaps cause some irritation along the f-file and Keres prefers to avoid this. The rest of the game is not relevant to this chapter, but it is interesting how Keres very gradually improves his position. I particularly like the way he gives away a pawn but wins it back with check almost by force.

32 ♘f4 ♖b3 33 ♖c3 ♖xc3 34 ♕xc3 ♕e4 35 ♕b3 b5 36 ♕xb5 ♕xe3+ 37 ♔f1 ♕f3+ 38 ♔g1 ♕e3+ 39 ♔f1 g5 40 ♘e2 ♘e5 41 ♕xb7 ♘d3 42 ♕c8+ ♔g7 43 ♕f5 ♕d2 44 ♘d4 ♕e1+ 45 ♔g2 ♕e3 46 ♕d5 ♕f2+ 47 ♔h3 ♕f1+ 48 ♔g4 ♘f2+ 49 ♔f5 ♕d3+ 50 ♔e5 ♘g4+ 51 ♔d6 ♕xa3+ 52 ♔c7 ♕e7+ 53 ♔c8 ♘e3

♕+♘+3 vs ♕+♘+2 would be hard enough for White to hold with this king on g1, but with the king on c8 it is completely lost because Black is effectively a piece (the king!) up.

54 ♕b5 ♕e4 55 ♕b2 ♔g6 56 ♕b6+ f6 57 ♘e6 ♘c4 58 ♕a6 ♘e5 59 ♘c7 ♕c2 60 ♕d6 ♕xh2 61 ♘d5 ♕f2 62 ♔b7 ♕xg3 63 ♕xf6+ ♔h5 64 ♕e6 ♘g4 65 ♘e7 ♕f3+ 66 ♔c8 ♔h4 67 ♘f5+ ♔h3 68 ♔d8 h5 69 ♕g6 ♘e5 70 ♕e6 ♘g4 71 ♕g6 ♘e5 72 ♕e6 ♕d3+ 73 ♘d4+ ♘g4 74 ♕d5 ♘f2 75 ♔c8 h4 76 ♕e5 ♕e4 77 ♕f6 ♕f4 78 ♘f5 ♘e4 79 ♕e6 ♕g4 0-1

Knowledge and Skill

Skill to do comes of doing
RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Keres won that game not so much because he knew that the position out of the opening was OK for him (knowledge), but because he knew how to handle it (skill). It is not easy to illustrate this distinction between knowledge and skill, because it is very subtle. One way to attempt to make it clearer is to re-describe it in slightly different terms. This is not difficult because I initially had the idea that such a distinction was important for chess improvement after reading a chapter in a philosophy book called *The Concept of Mind* by Gilbert Ryle. The second chapter of this book is called "Knowing *How* and Knowing *That*". Ryle actually uses chess to help to illustrate this distinction (my italics):

"An ordinary chess-player can partly follow the tactics and strategy of a champion; perhaps after much study he will completely understand the methods used by the champion in certain particular matches. But he can never wholly anticipate how the champion will fight his next contest and he is never as quick or sure in his interpretations of the champion's moves as the champion is in making, or perhaps, in explaining them ... *Learning how or improving in ability is not like learning that or acquiring information. Truths can be imparted, procedures can only be inculcated, and while inculcation is a gradual process, imparting is relatively sudden. It makes sense to ask at what moment someone became apprised of a truth, but not to ask at what moment someone acquired a skill.* 'Part-trained' is a significant phrase, 'part-informed' is not. Training is the art of setting tasks which the pupils have not yet accomplished but are not any longer quite incapable of accomplishing."

I think Ryle's statement makes it clear that 'know-how' is the priority for good chess, not 'know-that'. By this I mean that **accumulating knowledge about openings and endings, etc., is only useful in so far as it helps you know *how* to play the opening and the endgame, and this transition does not come automatically**. Rather, as Ryle suggests, it is acquired through painstaking training and practice. To be clear, I have nothing against knowledge, and it is true that stronger players tend to have more knowledge of chess positions than weaker ones.

What I am trying to make clear is that we tend to get the emphasis wrong. Another commentator, Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner, captures this point as follows (my italics): "Skill is a way of dealing with things, not a derivation from theory. Doubtless, skill can be improved with the aid of theory, as when we learn about the inside and outside edges of our skis, but our skiing doesn't improve until we get that knowledge back into the skill of skiing. *Knowledge helps only when it descends into habits*" (Bruner 1996).

The distinction between knowing how and knowing that is similar to the distinction between knowledge and skill, and for our purposes here, equivalent. I chose to focus on knowledge and skill because whenever I've spoken about this issue, a few discerning individuals saw the elegance of the know-how/know-that distinction, but in most cases it seemed too subtle and eyes started to glaze over. It is easier and clearer to speak of knowledge and skill, though in some ways I think Ryle's distinction is the more precise.

In case neither of these two distinctions means much to you, I came across a third saying much the same thing, in an article on *Chesscafe.com* by Nigel Davies called '*The How and the What*'. Extracts are copied below with the author's kind permission: "I recently saw a newsgroup discussion about tournament preparation. Everything under the sun was mentioned from openings to endings and strategy to tactics with everyone having their own idea about how it should be done. I just commented that 'the how is more important than the what', leaving anyone who read this guessing as to what I meant. In fact the comment was deliberately enigmatic ... It really doesn't matter what you study, the important thing is to use this as a training ground for *thinking* rather than trying to assimilate a mind-numbing amount of information. In these days of a zillion different chess products, this message seems to be quite lost, and indeed most people seem to want books that tell them what to do. The reality is that you've got to move the pieces around the board and *play* with the position. Who does that? Amateurs don't, GMs do..."

Players seeking to improve therefore need to place emphasis on developing their skill, not increasing their knowledge; to improve their 'know-how', and worry less about 'knowing that...'. They also need to focus less on the 'what' of chess, and more on the 'how' it is done. These are all different ways of saying the same thing and what it means is that if you want to get better at chess you need to place much less emphasis on 'study' whereby you increase your knowledge of positions, and place more emphasis on 'training', whereby you try to solve problems, play practice games, or perhaps try to beat a strong computer program from an advantageous position.

In any case, I believe this distinction between knowledge and skill gets to the heart of the matter concerning why younger players tend to find it relatively easy to improve. Junior players are keen to learn, but they tend to be even more eager to play. When they play through a game, analyse their games with a stronger player or look at a few rook endings, they seem to be able to absorb what they have learned and apply it in their games in a way that adults rarely manage. Paradoxically, the problem seems to be while junior players tend to put what they learn into practice without any real conscious intent, and thereby improve steadily, adult players *strain in an effort to understand* what they are learning, and this leads to all sorts of problems because rather than gaining in tactile skill, this skill is adulterated by our attempts to formalize it into knowledge. It seems that the gap between knowledge and skill is somehow smaller for juniors than it is for adults. But why is that? This is harder to explain, but it probably has something to do with younger players having greater neural plasticity and fewer prejudices getting in the way. In any case, once you grasp the significance of the distinction between knowledge and skill, the ground is clear to ask why adult improvement is so elusive.

To my mind, the problem can be distilled into two main parts:

1) Most players seek to increase their knowledge by learning new positions, and tend to study by "reading and nodding" as Nigel Davies put it. What they should be doing more often is

honing their skills, however meagre, by forcing themselves to think through training and practice.

2) Knowledge often gets in the way of skill, because it is not 'innocent' – and has to be constructed. This means that there will be limits to what you can learn by passive absorption and that you are more likely to make progress by unlearning some of your existing ideas primarily through the honest and rigorous analysis of your own games.

The Intelligent Unconscious

Contrary to popular opinion, the human mind is a closed book. The room behind the eyes is forever dark. No access is possible, either by thinking or via the senses – for thoughts and experiences are the products of this obscure factory, not glimpses of its operation ... In the mind, feelings are fabricated, thoughts are marshalled, perceptual pictures are painted. But of the painter and the engineer we have no idea ... Or rather, we can only have ideas.
GUY CLAXTON

This following short section could easily have been expanded into a whole chapter or even a whole book. Any comprehensive theory of chess psychology needs to take a stand on non-conscious aspects of cognition, because recent evidence from cognitive psychology strongly suggests that the thoughts and perceptions we are conscious of are dwarfed by the amount of information we are taking in at a non-conscious level (Claxton 1996, Wilson 2002). I am fully persuaded of this view of the mind and now feel much more comfortable about, for instance, playing a move that feels right even when I don't fully understand why it is right. However, I have chosen to keep this section relatively brief for now because it is very difficult to extrapolate any concrete chess advice from the psychological studies, and even more difficult to illustrate the role of how the unconscious operates in chess with instructive chess examples.

Many associate 'the unconscious' with Freud and psychoanalysis, but psychology has come a long way since then. In the popular imagination, 'the unconscious' used to be a kind of marshy pit where we nursed infantile wounds in the shadows of the bedroom, but these days the emphasis on unconscious aspects of cognition is much more positive and this is reflected in the terminology "the intelligent unconscious" (Claxton) or "the adaptive unconscious" (Wilson).

It is important to stress that 'the unconscious' is not a single thing, or place, or mechanism, but rather a shorthand way of describing the numerous things that happen in our minds without us being consciously aware of it. The following extract, taken from Timothy Wilson's *Strangers to Ourselves*, highlights why it is worth being aware of the extent of what we are not aware of!

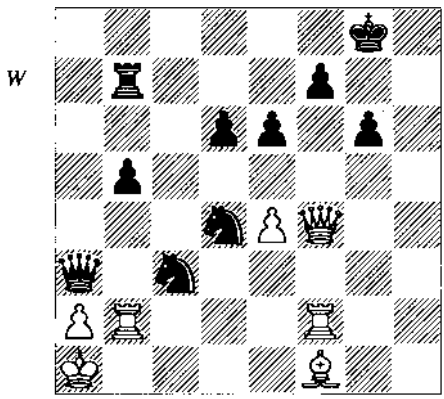
"Consider that at any given moment, our five senses are taking in more than 11,000,000 pieces of information. Scientists have determined this number by counting the receptor cells each sense organ has and the nerves that go from these cells to the brain. Our eyes alone receive and send over 10,000,000 signals to our brains each second. Scientists also tried to determine how many of these signals can be processed consciously at any given point in time, by looking at such things as how quickly people can read, consciously detect different flashes of light, and tell apart different kinds of smells. The most liberal estimate is that people can process consciously about 40 pieces of information a second. Think about it: we take in 11,000,000 pieces of information a second, but can process only 40 of them consciously. What happens to the other 10,999,960?"

This is a provocative question, and the initial study's definition of 'piece of information' strikes me as contentious. Nonetheless, I raise the question here because one of the reasons it is so difficult to improve at chess is that it is impossible to know precisely what you are thinking during play. You can have a rough idea, based on memory, but even during the game you can't really know what you are thinking, for two main reasons: First, when you stop to think about how you are thinking you are no longer thinking in the same way. Second, we have introspective access to the conscious

products of thought, which we have to construct, but we have absolutely no access to the processes of thought, and it is only when these processes start to improve that we become better players.

In my experience, most players who improve can explain why they have improved, e.g. because of hard work, but they usually can't explain very clearly *how* they have improved, i.e. what they are doing differently now from before. In line with this idea, Loek van Wely put it to me that you only know you are improving when your opponents seem to be playing badly more often than before!

I think what we are learning about the intelligent unconscious makes some sense of the ineffability of improvement. Improvement comes about through improved thought-processes, but these processes are 'off-stage', functioning at a non-conscious level. This gives further weight to the idea that we need to cultivate skill rather than increase knowledge because 'skill' improves when our unconscious processes improve, not when we have more knowledge to call upon as products of thought. However, while I think that reflecting on the significance of unconscious processing supports the view that developing skill is more important than acquiring knowledge, drawing attention to the significance of the unconscious is also a way of admitting that the how and why of chess improvement is always going to be somewhat mysterious.



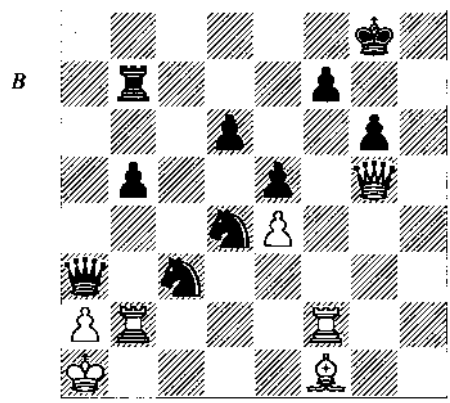
Rowson – Emms
Gibraltar 2004

Five moves previously, I was completely lost. Objectively my position is still much worse, but I managed to confuse my opponent in mutual time-trouble and now I have some chances of my own. I could see that I needed to get my queen to the h4-d8 diagonal in order to give a perpetual check from d8-f6 and perhaps, given the chance, I would use the h-file too. However, my pieces are tied down to the defence of my king, and I can't move my queen off the c1-h6 diagonal due to the threat of ...♘b3+ and ...♕c1+, mating. The most natural move now would be 38 ♕g5 but after seeing 38...♖d7! I felt stuck – I didn't see a good follow-up. My clock was ticking so instead of 38 ♕g5 I played the only other reasonable move that came to mind:

38 ♕e3! e5?

38...♕c5! is much stronger, and still much better for Black, but none of this was clear at the time and we were both playing on instinct. The queen seems strong on a3, and gives Black a lot of tactical possibilities – I don't think either of us thought it should be moved away.

39 ♕g5 *(D)*



And now I thought to myself: "Why on earth did I waste a tempo and let him defend that loose knight on d4?" I was kicking myself for being so stupid and now I expected 39...♖d7, when I wasn't sure what I would play.

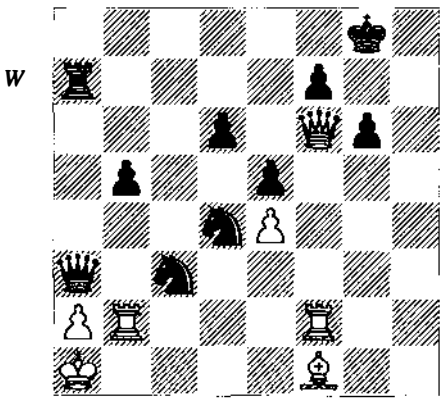
39...♖a7

Black has much better moves here, but it is no longer clear if he is winning. 39...♕a8! looks safest but the queen has been an asset on a3 for

a while and this is not the kind of move that is easy to play when you are in time-trouble.

I had seen the line 39...♘xe4 40 ♕d8+ ♔g7 41 ♖h2, and concluded that it looked like progress. It is progress, because Black now has to force a draw with 41...♘b3+ 42 ♖xb3 ♕c1+ 43 ♖b1 ♕c3+ 44 ♖bb2! (it looks tempting to keep the extra rook by 44 ♖hb2, but after 44...♘d2 there are an awful lot of threats to deal with, not least 45...♘b3+ 46 axb3 ♖a7+, mating).

40 ♕d8+ ♔g7 41 ♕f6+ ♔g8 *(D)*



Now that I had collected a few minutes on the clock (we were playing with a one-minute increment) I had the luxury of taking some time to come to terms with the fact that I had secured a draw. However, I took a moment to look at 42 ♗d3 in case it was worth playing on. Then, all of the sudden, the following move announced its presence:

42 ♗c4!!

I had not seen this wonderful move in advance and, on a conscious level, it played absolutely no part in my reasoning when I played 38 ♕e3! in order to provoke ...e5. It seemed that I was attracted to the idea of Black playing ...e5, but I had no idea why at the time. Nigel Short said he had seen the idea of ♗c4 coming 'a mile away' but it came as a complete shock to both players, and I think this is mainly because the e5-pawn had been on e6 for so long. In any case, the move is completely devastating for Black, because it combines attack and defence and leaves Black without an adequate answer.

42...d5 43 ♖h2 1-0

The fact that 38 ♕e3 made 42 ♗c4 possible could be simply a matter of luck, and there is no convincing way to show otherwise. However, when I played 38 ♕e3 there was definitely a part of me that wanted to provoke ...e5, even though I couldn't explain to myself why. Somehow I liked the fact that ...e5 weakened Black's light squares and went for it, but then after he played 38...e5 I felt it was ridiculous to be thinking 'positionally' when the position was so concrete and tactical. At a conscious level it seemed to me that unless provoking ...e5 gave me additional possibilities, it would surely be better to leave the d4-knight unprotected. Just a few moves later it looked 'as if' I had played 38 ♕e3 with the idea of playing ♗c4 later. At a conscious level I certainly did not have this idea, but given how little of what happens mentally becomes conscious, I now think it is quite likely that I had in some sense 'seen' this idea when I played 38 ♕e3. To push this claim would be ridiculous, because nobody knows or can know, but I hope this example illustrates what it means to say that our conscious thoughts are a mere fraction of what we are actually thinking during a game, and also that 'know-how' depends a lot on our capacity to work things out at a non-conscious level.

Developing Skill

We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.
ARISTOTLE

In this chapter I have suggested that we struggle to improve with existing methods because they are based on a faulty view of the way we learn. I also highlighted that we need to place emphasis on foresight rather than hindsight and skill rather than knowledge. Moreover, we construct our understanding of chess and need to unlearn a lot of the things that make sense to us. In light of all that, how should we go about trying to improve?

The most honest answer is that I'm not entirely sure. My informed guess, however, is that chess skill emerges from chess playing

combined with chess training, where 'training' means working things out by yourself. The main skill a chess-player needs is skill in making decisions, so that's what you need to do, and do repeatedly. **If you want to become a better player, you need better habits, and you cultivate better habits through training. The best training is the kind that pushes you up against the edges of your comfort zone, where you force yourself to take responsibility for difficult decisions.** It is so much easier to read books that give strategic guidelines, hints and tips, etc., but what you need is 'know-how' and that means learning by doing.

The best way to cultivate better habits is to try to work things out on the basis of your existing habits, and look closely at how you are falling short. You will find that most mistakes do not come from not knowing things, but from not seeing things, or not doing things. You can work on this by playing and then analysing your games honestly, by solving complex chess problems, or by trying to win won positions against strong analysis engines. I even think you can develop skill with an intelligent use of blitz games – whereby you don't analyse the positions in depth, but compare your first impressions of positions with the way they actually developed.

With these approaches you are not taking in any new 'knowledge' so you might feel that you are not growing as a player. However, if the arguments in this chapter make sense to you, and you can trust in that kind of training process, I believe you will find that your level of skill improves, and with it, your results.

2 Psycho-Logics

Five senses; an incurably abstract intellect; a haphazard selective memory; a set of preconceptions and assumptions so numerous that I can never examine more than a minority of them – never become conscious of them all. How much of total reality can such an apparatus let through?
C.S. LEWIS

The following paragraph was recently forwarded to me by email:

"I cdnuolt blveiee taht I cluod aulaclty uesdnatnrd waht I was rdanieg. The phaonmneal pweor of the hmuan mind... Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be in the rghit pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. Amzanig huh? Yaeh, and I awlyas tohuhgt slpeling was ipmorantt!..."

Some might find this paragraph shocking, because this random collage of characters and spaces shouldn't mean anything to us at all. The fact that it does mean something to us highlights our capacity to make meaning out of things that seem to be inherently meaningless. It is not just that we recognize fragments of familiar patterns in the above paragraph, we also manage to put these fragments together in a form that makes sense, and, perhaps most surprising of all, we do this without even trying. We don't do this by reason or intuition, but more directly and spontaneously, by 'meaning-making'. One of my professors at Harvard put it like this: "An organism organizes. What a human organism organizes is meaning ... the most fundamental thing we do with what happens to us is organize it. We literally make sense." (Kegan 1982)

While pattern-recognition is as old as the hills, this emphasis on meaning-making is relatively new. Many psychologists have tried to stay away from the messy business of 'meaning' because they envy the scientific precision of the natural sciences and want to sanitize the psyche and study cognition as a form of information processing, modelled on computers. However, there are a growing number of psychologists who want to keep the human mind embedded in its social and cultural roots and to emphasize that cognition has more to do with meaning-making than information processing. This is a crude dichotomy, but my sympathies are certainly with those who emphasize the primacy of meaning-making. If chess has taught me anything, it has taught me that cognition is an irredeemably messy business. Reflecting on what the emphasis on meaning-making might mean for chess-players resulted in Chapters 3 and 4, but is also more immediately relevant in considering the role of psychology in chess.

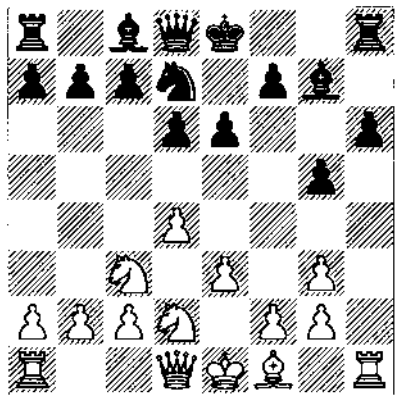
I blame Freud for giving psychology a bad name. When I say that chess is psychological, fear not; I am not talking about your mother or your father. Chess is complex enough without invoking any other complexes to explain it. However, I do think that whoever first claimed that chess is a logical game was probably eating at the time. My guess is that he was misquoted and there was a bit before 'logical' that was muffled out by potatoes[4].

Chess is a logical game, in the sense that is concerned with a kind of reasoning, but the most salient logic is not the digital logic of theoretical mathematics or the emotionless logic of *Star Trek*'s Mr Spock. It is a logic that swims around in the sticky undercurrents of our thoughts, the logic of our psyches, what I call our 'psycho-logics'. Whatever meaning we find in a position is based on our psycho-logics,

as I hope the following example will begin to illustrate:

Te. Petersen – Rowson
Torshavn 2000

1 d4 ♘f6 2 ♘f3 e6 3 ♗g5 h6 4 ♗h4 d6 5 ♘c3 g5 6 ♗g3 ♘h5 7 e3 ♗g7 8 ♘d2 ♘xg3 9 hxg3 ♘d7 *(D)*



I have shown this position to a couple of my students to gauge their ability to play with purpose in the early stages of the game. In both cases they had about 15 minutes to think it over. To make the most of what follows, it would be worth doing the same thing yourself before reading on.

(Seriously! You should give it a try before reading on. Didn't you read Chapter 1?)

The first student was rated close to 2000 USCF. He wanted to play 10 ♘b3 because he didn't like the knight on d2 and thought that White should try to play e4. He noted that 10...c5 could be met with 11 ♘e4 and that this favoured White. He said that he considered 10 a4!?, which had some initial appeal, but then he decided that it didn't really do anything. This appraisal is not bad, but the knight is flexibly placed on d2 and does little on b3, especially when Black responds 10...b6, and then probably continues with ...♗b7, ...♕e7 and ...0-0-0 with a promising position. More to the point, White should be cautious about trying to play e4 because this significantly improves the scope of Black's unopposed bishop on g7 and doesn't really cause Black any inconvenience.

The 'psycho' elements here are quite subtle and not too severe. The desire to play e4 is a desire to 'do something' when the first priority should be to get more fully mobilized and coordinated. Also, the dislike of the knight on d2 seems a little arbitrary and I suspect the desire to put the knight on b3 is at least partly aesthetic – knights together often look quite pretty. However, compare this to the psycho-logic of the following student who has some tactical flair but is a highly erratic player, and rated around 1600.

He felt that White had fairly big problems! He has learned (from me!) that it is useful to think about what your opponent might be trying to do before thinking of your own ideas, but here he overdid it. He felt that he had to deal with the 'threat' of ...e5. Once he had framed the problem in this way he came up with a 'solution'. His attention quickly focused on ...e5 and he saw that if Black plays ...e5, and White takes, the d7-knight comes to life, as does the g7-bishop. That seems like a sensible thought, but he also felt that White couldn't really meet ...e5 with d5 because then "the f1-bishop would not be happy and Black could cause trouble with ...♘c5 and ...e4."

These assumptions are way off the mark, but on the basis of this 'psycho-logic', 10 ♗b5!(?) makes perfect sense. Now after 10...e5 White can exchange the 'bad' bishop and close the position with d5, which should, thought my student, favour the knights (also not true). He anticipated 10...c6 11 ♗e2 e5 12 d5 c5 13 ♗b5! and again 'the problem' is solved. (Likewise with 10...a6 11 ♗xd7+ ♗xd7.) Given the initial assumption, this is indeed an impressively 'logical' approach, but it is the bizarre assumption that began this train of thought, combined with the concepts used to bring it to a conclusion (e.g. knights better in blocked positions), that makes it 'psycho-logical'.

Was ...e5 really a problem? When I see ...e5 I am immediately drawn to the weakness of the f5-square and I also don't see any big drawback to White playing d5. Indeed I see it as very promising because we can try to follow up with g4 and ♘e4 if possible or just close the position

with e4, when the g7-bishop is really bad. The idea that White has a problem with the f1-bishop after d5 just isn't true. It may not be the best bishop of all time, but it already has decent scope on the f1-a6 diagonal and the chances of the position opening with ...c6 or ...f5 are quite high, in which case it will have even more scope. However, on the basis of this erroneous assumption White would have made his position worse.

Therefore, **the first difficulty with the idea of chess being logical is that logic by itself cannot tell you which features of the position are most important, and therefore what you should be reasoning about.** (The second difficulty is that even when you know what you should be reasoning about, it is extremely hard to reason your way to the heart of the position! See 'The Lazy Detective' in Chapter 5).

En passant, I think part of the reason my student's assumption was flawed was that he had a problem disassociating 'atoms' (moves) and 'molecules' (a collection of moves or an idea). In this case my student saw a 'molecular' response to d5 of ...♘c5 and ...e4. But of course, that's two moves! White can do something in the interim (e.g. play e4 himself). See the second example under 'Moves and Ideas' in Chapter 6 for a further illustration of this theme.

I like the term 'psycho-logics' because it makes logic relative to the individual psyche and not to any canonical measure of truth. It also reminds me of Edward de Bono's idea of 'logic bubbles' whereby to understand another person's perspective you have to try to get inside their logic bubble for a while, and forget about your own. It also hints at the waywardness of our minds, and the fact that some of our thoughts flirt with the boundaries of sanity. However, we can also get a better feel for 'psycho-logics' by comparing it to some very basic formal logic in which one thing follows from another.

The classic example is: "All bachelors are unmarried men; Tom is a bachelor, therefore Tom is not married." This is fine, because the premise is true by definition and the conclusion follows comfortably. However, in the game in question the 'logic' was something like: "If Black plays ...e5 I will have problems, ♗b5 seems to stop Black playing ...e5; therefore I should play ♗b5." Every stage in this argument is faulty, but the initial assumption is the most flagrant error. My impression is that this is often the case, though sometimes the problem is more subtle; e.g.: "Some wing attacks should be met by a counter in the centre; I am being attacked on the wing, therefore I should counter in the centre." This is a mistake, because the conclusion would only follow if it were true that *all* wing attacks should be countered in the centre, and we know that chess is not that simple! And yet so many mistakes in chess arise from very basic logical fallacies just like this.

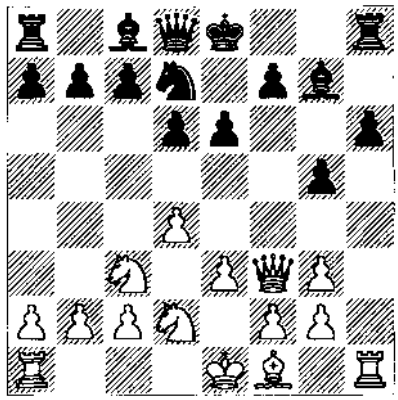
What these examples suggest is that there is a problem with this kind of logical reasoning. It is not just that players make faulty premises, questionable inferences and invalid conclusions, but the whole approach is wrong. This has been known in chess psychology for some time; e.g., "The idea comes before the logical argument" – Gerald Abrahams (1951). I am not claiming that anyone tries to play chess with basic logical propositions like the ones above, but I do think the limitations of applying crude formal logic to chess highlights the more general problem of trying to seek 'solutions' to clear-cut problems, when most chess problems are anything but clear-cut. **Playing good chess usually means accepting that clear-cut solutions are quite rare, and that when they exist they won't necessarily follow any logical argument.**

Grandmaster Luke McShane was stuck around 2550 for two years but then gained over 100 rating points and catapulted himself into the world top fifty in one year. He told me that he started making this significant headway when he realized that there aren't really 'solutions' in chess. By this he meant that you are more likely to play well just by playing, solving problems as you go, but knowing that in the process new problems of very different kinds will be created, and that you will have to solve them too. In this sense problem-solving is more like an ongoing process that we need to tune in to, rather than an occasional mindset that we switch on when we see a problem and then off when we think we've solved it.

In the example of the second student, we have a good example of a 'psycho-logic'. The logical reasoning was quite compelling, but because his approach was too crude, and because the reasoning stemmed from a faulty premise, it did not get to the heart of the matter about the position. My opponent in the game also struggled to come up with a good plan:

10 ♕f3?! *(D)*

B



It's hard to say what set of assumptions led to this move, but it was probably based at least partly on the (dubious) inference that since White has the half-open h-file he should be castling queenside.

10...a6!

A flexible move. There's no need to do anything too quickly.

11 g4?! d5 12 e4?! 0-0!

13 exd5 e5! was my idea, when Black's position really comes to life.

13...c5!

Much better than 13...e5?! 14 ♘b3! when I have a weak spot on f5.

14 dxc5 d4 15 ♘a4?!

15 ♘e2 ♘e5! 16 ♕g3 d3! 17 ♘c3 dxc2 18 ♔xc2 ♕e7 19 ♘b3 ♗d7 gives Black more than enough compensation. ...♖fc8, ...a5 and ...b6 are all on the cards, and White has no dark-square control and no counterplay.

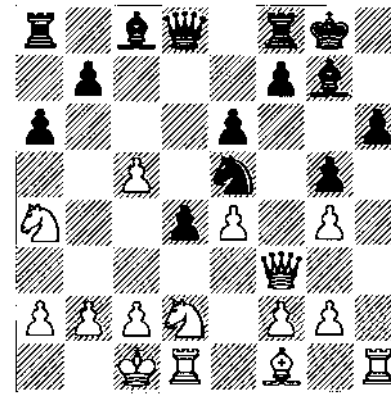
15...♘e5 *(D)*

16 ♕e2?

16 ♕g3 is better, but Black still has the initiative.

16...♕a5 17 ♘b6 d3! 18 ♘b3?

W



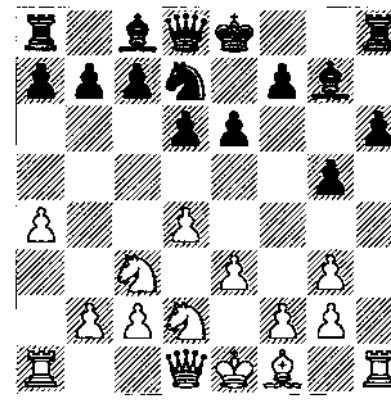
18 cxd3 ♕xc5+ 19 ♘bc4 b5 20 d4 ♕xd4 21 ♘xe5 ♕xe5 gives Black domination, but is still better than the game.

18...dxe2 19 ♘xa5 exd1♕+ 0-1

In the post-mortem we looked at the position before move 10 for a while and decided that if the position proceeded normally Black would be very comfortable. For instance, after the plausible sequence 10 ♗d3 d5 11 ♘e2 c5 12 c3 ♕b6 13 ♖b1 ♘f6 Black has central control and the two bishops are an important factor.

Looking at it now, I think we generally overestimated Black's chances if the game proceeds as normal, but what bothered me at the time is that we couldn't see a convincing way for White to develop any ideas and get fully into the game. Tiger Hillarp Persson was watching the post-mortem and he was also perplexed until he hit upon 10 a4!? *(D)* with the stated aim of "trying to grab some squares".

B

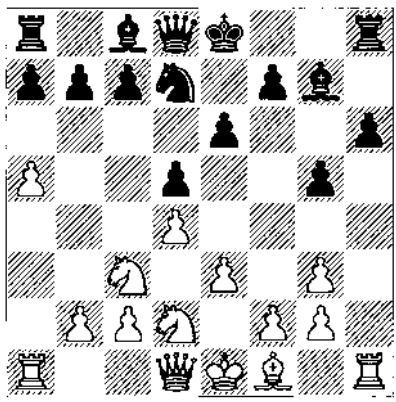


First of all, 10 a4 is directed against ...b6, when White plays a5 with pressure, but one way or another it will also force Black to create some sort of weakness on the queenside that will form the basis for further purposeful play from White. 10 a4 does not radically change the position, so White should not expect too much, but what makes it such a good move is that it is purposeful without being too committal. The following gives an idea of how things might develop.

a) 10...a5?! looks obvious, but then Black can never play ...c5 without seriously weakening b5 and thus it will be harder to bring the bishops into play without weakening f5 (after ...e5). I think this point is easier to understand if you are accustomed to thinking of a position from the point of view of both sides. If instead you suffer from a lot of *egoism* (*7DCS*) you are more likely to see 10...a5 as stopping your plan of advancing the a-pawn, forgetting that your opponent also has plans, especially playing ...c5, and that you have made a big gain by discouraging this.

b) 10...d5 11 a5! *(D)* and now:

B



b1) 11...a6 12 b4!? ♕e7 13 ♖b1 c6 is unclear. The white pawns on dark squares restrict Black's unopposed bishop, but if White loses control his position will be full of holes.

b2) 11...0-0 12 a6 b6 13 ♗b5! c5 (13...♘b8 14 ♕h5 c5 15 ♘f3 ♗d7 16 ♘e5! with a dangerous initiative) 14 ♗c6 ♖b8 15 ♘b5!. This line is a particularly strong illustration of the purpose behind 10 a4.

b3) 11...c5! 12 ♘b5!? (played on the understanding that Black doesn't really want to weaken his queenside structure by playing ...a6 because it would be automatically fixed due to the presence of White's a5-pawn) 12...0-0 13 c3 ♕e7 14 ♗d3 ♘f6 and a meaty middlegame beckons.

So what made a grandmaster find a move like 10 a4, which forces Black to think carefully, while my students struggled to get to grips with the position and proposed ideas that shouldn't trouble Black at all? The quick answer is that I don't know, but clearly Tiger has a wider repertoire of positions that he is unconsciously accessing when he tries to make sense of a new one. His pattern-recognition capacity is more finely attuned and he has a better feel for this kind of early middlegame situation more generally. I suspect that after looking at the position for a while, Tiger began to get a feeling that the knights needed to be more effective. From his experience he knows that knights like to be sitting comfortably, ideally in the opponent's territory, where they can cause trouble without worrying about being hassled by pawns. To make that happen, White needs to create some secure squares for them, and to make secure squares White needs to provoke pawn moves. I don't know if this is an accurate reflection of his thoughts, and, crucially, neither would Tiger, because what gave rise to 10 a4 was not a conscious and logical process but a shifting degree of emphasis on different aspects of the position that slowly emerged from playing around with various ideas in his mind.

What I am getting at is that grandmasters also have 'psycho-logics' and have to rummage around in their psyches to come up with good moves too. We all think on the basis of psychologics, but some do it better than others. Although we are all meaning-makers, the clarity of the meaning we take from positions varies enormously. It is not totally clear why this is so, but I suspect it has something to do with stronger players perceiving the board with fewer prejudices, and a more effective filter for getting rid of bad ideas. This 'filter' may be shaped largely by experience, but the following section suggests one way that we might make better use of it.

The Importance of Not Having a Clue

If a man will begin in certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties.
FRANCIS BACON

In my late teens, rated around 2400, I had the impression that grandmasters, especially stronger ones, *knew* certain things. I really thought if you showed them a position they would be able to say, with conviction: 'this one is winning', 'this one is drawn', etc. Moreover, I thought that they would be able to explain their judgements in a way that would enlighten me.

This impression began to unravel when I played Boris Gulko in 1996 at the Copenhagen Open. I think Gulko was the first 2600+ I had played, and I was delighted to draw against him and also pleased when he offered to look at the game together. In the post-mortem I remember asking him about one position: "Is this winning for White?" and he replied: "I don't know, but some chances." I found this rather vexing. You don't know? If you don't, then who does? 'Some chances' – what's that supposed to mean? At first I thought that Gulko was unusual, but over the years I have come to appreciate that this kind of attitude is prevalent among strong GMs. I would even go further and stake the claim that, excluding beginners, **the stronger a player is, the more likely he is to begin by saying "I don't know" when you ask him what is happening in a position!**

I am being a little mischievous here, because they don't really say "I don't know" as such; more often they will say something like: "Hmm, not so clear, probably better for White, but depends on finding the right move here". It is not that they have no idea what is going on, but rather that they have developed a certain respect for the complexity of chess and so the claims they make about a position are more tentative, only to be confirmed after careful analysis. You will sometimes hear: "This must be good for White", "This is easily winning", etc., but in my experience it is not the norm.

This anecdotal claim has been tentatively supported at a scientific level by Michelle Cowley and Ruth Byrne at Trinity College, Dublin. Although the sample of chess-players was quite small (20) the results were quite compelling. In essence, the finding was that the better you are at chess, the more likely you are to approach a position 'scientifically', i.e. you are more likely to look at a position in an effort to falsify or disprove your theory about it.

It was found that novices were more likely to convince themselves that bad moves would work out in their favour, because they focused more on the countermoves that would benefit their strategy while ignoring those that contradicted their initial assessments and ideas of how the position should develop. Conversely, stronger players tended to predict the eventual outcome of a move correctly, because they were more willing to look at lines that would challenge or contradict their ideas about the position.

The technical way to express the findings is that stronger players tend to seek to *falsify* their hypotheses; e.g., (from the first example in this chapter) "I think if I play 10 a4 the position is OK for White but it might be too slow given that White is underdeveloped; it depends if Black can open the position quickly...) while weaker players try to *verify* their hypotheses (e.g. I need to stop Black playing ...e5, 10 ♗b5 seems to stop it, and even if Black plays ...c6 it is not good for Black to follow up with ...e5 so ♗b5 looks good...).

Those with an interest in the philosophy of science will recognize that this is in line with Karl Popper's criterion for what makes a method of enquiry 'scientific' – that it is capable of being falsified. This falsificationist approach not only leads to better practical results; those who approach chess with this method of enquiry are more likely to keep growing as players because they are constantly questioning and refining their approach to the game.

However, cognitive research has also shown that many people find falsification extremely difficult. Certainly, I know from my experience of teaching chess that it does not come naturally by any means. Ruth Byrne seems to think that the ability to falsify is somehow linked to

being an expert in a field. I guess this is similar to the old adage that the more you know, the more you realize how little you know. In any case, my impression is that the Dublin study is on to something important.

Strong players have a fuller sense of how difficult chess is because after moving through successive stages of understanding they gradually learn that ultimately there is no end in sight. From my own experience, I know that even now, around number 150 in the world, I feel that in many positions I am seeing only a fraction of what there is to be seen. Of course we can approach the truth, and strive to understand the game more deeply, but we have limitations. Therefore I would advise all players: be confident in your own abilities and your capacity to defeat the opponent, but temper this confidence with humility towards the game as a whole. **It is much wiser to approach chess with an "I don't know; let's see" mindset, than an "It's like this; I'll prove it" mindset.** The latter might make you feel stronger, and it will attract more attention, but the former will actually make you stronger, and will attract more points.

Identity

The biggest obstacles ... are attachments to self-images and concepts of who we are and how we want to be. They complicate unnecessarily the very simple experience of what it is that is happening.
JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN

As I argued in the previous section, our results are likely to improve if we become better at questioning our own judgement and looking at the position with a view to falsifying our ideas. However, this is extremely difficult, and I think there are two kinds of attachment that make it so hard. The first is our attachment to a certain chess identity, considered here, and the second is an attachment to a certain view of what normal chess should look like, considered in the next section.

In Chapter 1, I suggested that our understanding of the game does not build up brick by brick, but is constructed in a much more complex way, usually over a long period of time. One of the things that lead us to construct our understanding of the game in a certain way is the desire to reinforce an image or identity that we have chosen for ourselves. This point is developed in later chapters, but is important to introduce now because it is fundamental to the difficulties we have in improving.

I remember when I was 14 and rated around 2000, my first chess coach, FM Donald Holmes, advised me to put my openings to one side for a while and concentrate on improving my calculation. At the time, I was very comfortable with my repertoire, which involved playing a Scheveningen with a Taimanov move-order and a sketchy Grünfeld as Black, and main-line 1 e4 openings as White. I used to write down my openings on a piece of paper and felt a certain pride in these variations, mainly because I felt that they were *mine*. In any case, I told Donald that I would work on my calculation soon, but first I wanted to 'complete' my opening repertoire, and make sure that there were no problems with my openings. He laughed, and advised me, rightly, that I would *never* be able to do that.

This was a bit of a blow, for my desire to sort out my openings was really a desire to bolster my own identity as a chess-player. Without an opening repertoire I could fully identify with, I felt less secure about my chess more generally. In *Understanding the Grünfeld*, I referred to this idea of trying to construct a system of openings without flaws or omissions as the desire to have a 'chequered security blanket'. In general, I think we are better off without such bedding, because it merely gives us the illusion of completeness, rather than the real thing. Moreover, even Kasparov has holes in his repertoire, and (very) occasionally these holes lead him to lose games.

Trying to build a reliable opening repertoire is a worthwhile pursuit, but it's important to realize that it won't significantly improve your chess if the variations are just pasted over layers of confusion. And even when you think that you generally know what you are doing in certain structures, you might find this a hindrance

in cases that are similar but not identical. I know lots of 'chess junkies' who have massive chess libraries and eagerly await books on their favourite openings. Most of these books say very little that is new or transformative in any way. Indeed, most will just give the illusion of security that the chequered security blanket affords, while, under the covers, sub-optimal thinking patterns are being reinforced.

It's not just in our choice and approach to openings that our 'identities' get in the way. In most games, many mistakes are made because we make decisions on the basis of who we consider ourselves to be ("I'm an attacking player", "I prefer closed positions", "I don't like being material down", "I play well in time-trouble", "I try not to play passively", etc.). The common factor here is the 'I' and it causes a lot of problems. I raised this issue with respect to the sin of 'egoism' in *7DCS*, but in that case it was focused on failing to think enough about the opponent during the game. In this case, the emphasis is on personal identity.

This emphasis on identity stems from my experience as a chess-player and observations as a chess tutor. During play, in addition to the calculation of variations and other modes of thinking about the position, there is usually some kind of running commentary going on in our heads about who we are and what we should be trying to do in this game. This commentary often involves stories about the position ("he'll attack me on the kingside, I'll break in the centre, and win the ending, because I'm better than him at endings"). Often there are no variations, just stories, and sometimes there are myths operating too, in that we are trying to live up to a certain ideal, and trying to make the position conform to that ideal. I have seen these things countless times, and they are the subject of Chapters 3 and 4.

In any case, I believe we spend a disproportionate amount of our chess study time on openings precisely because we can associate with openings, and identify with them, more than we can to other parts of the game. **We speak of 'working on *my* openings' but not so much *my* endgames or *my* middlegames. It seems to me that this is because the openings we play are part of our chess identities. We invest time and energy in them because we want to bolster whatever sense of ourselves as chess-players that we have constructed.**

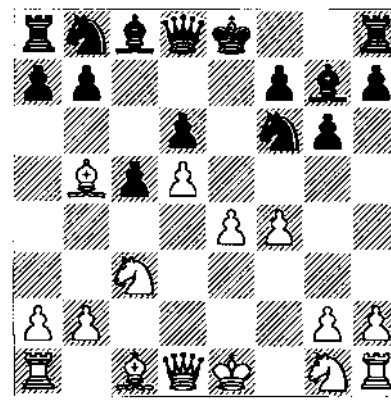
The following is a game between two of my students, both rated around 2000 at the time it was played. I believe it shows something about the way strong club players approach the opening, in terms of how they learn it, how they mix things up, and why it often doesn't seem to matter very much. I have included some 'history' to the game, to show that we perceive things in relation to what we have experienced before, and also in relation to who we think we are as chess-players.

Rattray – Theil
Internet 2004

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 e6 4 ♘c3 exd5 5 cxd5 d6 6 g3

I believe the so-called 'Flick-Knife Attack' (or Taimanov Attack) 6 e4 g6 7 f4 ♗g7 8 ♗b5+ *(D)* is still rather strong.

B

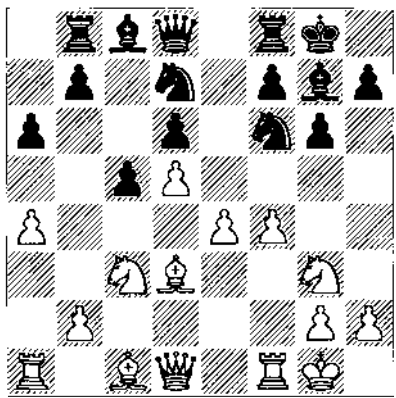


There have been two main attempts to solve Black's problems (8...♘bd7 and 8...♘fd7 followed by ...♕h4+) but neither seems very convincing to me. While I was teaching Carey Theil (playing Black here) we spent a fair while worrying about this issue until it dawned on me that we were not making the best use of our time together. I still believe that with 'best play', Black has no fully adequate answer to the Flick-Knife Attack, but many of these lines

leave White with only a small edge, usually in rather complex situations, so the effort spent trying to change a ± assessment to an '=' or an '∞' could be better spent on improving other aspects of Carey's play. **However, when you consider the role that openings play in our chess identities, wilfully playing an opening in which you know you should be worse with best play is tantamount to walking around with a culpable character defect!**

The following game gives some background to Carey's experience with the Modern Benoni in less critical lines: 6 e4 g6 7 ♗d3 ♗g7 8 ♘ge2 0-0 9 0-0 a6 10 a4 ♘bd7 11 f4 ♖b8 (11...c4!? 12 ♗xc4 ♕b6+ 13 ♔h1 ♘g4 14 ♕e1 ♘e3 15 a5 ♕a7 16 ♗xe3 ♕xe3 with decent compensation) 12 ♘g3 *(D)*.

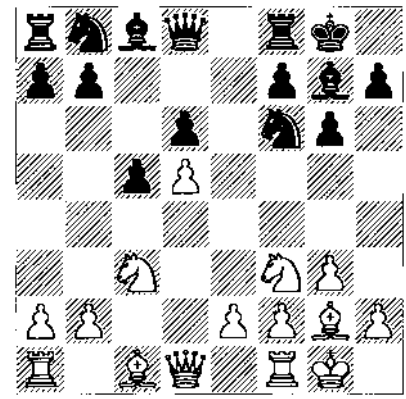
B



12...♘e8? (Black plays a conventional manoeuvre, aiming at ...♘c7 and ...b5; however, this is somewhat too slow and more radical measures were called for: 12...h5! 13 e5 dxe5 14 f5 c4 15 ♗xc4 {15 ♗c2!?} 15...h4 16 ♘ge4 b5! is more like the spirit that Black needed here) 13 ♕e2 ♕e7 14 ♗e3 ♘c7 15 ♖ae1 ♖e8 (missing the last chance to play 15...b5!; after 16 axb5 axb5 17 ♘xb5 ♘xb5 18 ♗xb5 Carey saw that 18...♗xb2 wasn't working very well {no direct refutation, but White has all the fun} and since ...b5 was inextricably linked with 18...♗xb2, he felt that it wasn't ready yet; however, in this position 18...♘f6! leaves the position rather tense and Black can claim that he has a 'good Benko' in that White's extra pawn can be thought of as the weakling on b2) 16 e5! dxe5 17 ♘ge4 ♕f8 18 f5 ♖d8 19 ♗g5 ♗h6!? 20 d6 ♘a8 21 ♗e7 ♕e8 22 fxg6 hxg6 23 ♗c4 1-0 Ludeng-Thiel, Boston 2003. That was a powerfully played game by White, but I think Carey learned something about the importance of generating counterplay before it is too late. For another, somewhat different, case that informed Carey's judgement in this game, consider his game in the Modern Benoni in Chapter 3.

6...g6 7 ♗g2 ♗g7 8 ♘f3 0-0 9 0-0 *(D)*

B



9...♖e8

Carey had been playing the Modern Benoni for quite a while before this game, but Gordon (Rattray) had only just started playing g3 systems. 9...♖e8 is slightly unusual and now it is tempting for White to try something to take advantage of this move. However, Gordon is familiar with the plan of ♘d2-c4 and decides to stick with it. 9...♘a6!? 10 ♘d2 ♘c7 11 a4 b6 12 ♘c4 ♖b8 13 ♗f4 ♗a6 14 ♘a3 ♘h5 15 ♗d2 ♗c8 16 ♖b1 ♗d7 17 ♘ab5 ♘xb5 18 ♘xb5 ♗xb5 19 axb5 ♕d7 20 ♕b3 ♘f6 21 ♖a1 ♖fe8 22 ♖fe1 ♖b7 23 e4 left White with a commanding position in Rattray-R.Guilian, Scotland 2004. This was Gordon's only game in this line prior to this game and note that he won by gaining the two bishops and gradually advancing in the centre. He tries to emulate that in this game, in spite of the fact that the positions are rather different.

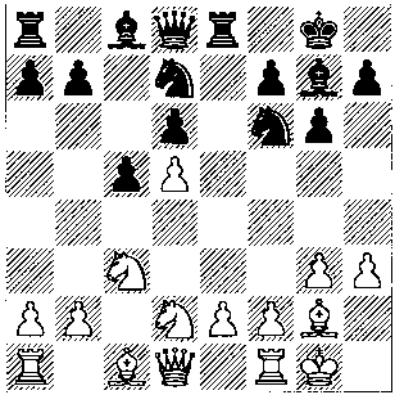
10 ♘d2

There is no clear theoretical verdict on the line 10 ♗f4!? ♘e4 (10...♘h5!?) 11 ♘xe4 ♖xe4

12 ♘d2 ♖xf4!? 13 gxf4 ♗xb2 14 ♖b1 ♗g7, but I would always prefer to be Black in such positions because it's just so much more fun to be the instigator of such imbalances.

10...♘bd7 11 h3 *(D)*

B



This is a useful move for White to play in this line, along with lots of other useful moves like ♖e1 and a4. The trouble lies in knowing when to play them. The main point here is that ...♘e5 can be met by f4 without allowing ...♘eg4.

11...a6 12 a4 ♖b8 13 ♘c4 ♘b6

13...♘e5!? is a sharper option, and often involves Black sacrificing a piece.

14 ♘a3 ♗d7 15 a5 ♘a8!?

15...♘c8 is normal, but I suspect Carey's move is not so bad. Note that while it is highly conventional to put the knight on c7 in the Modern Benoni, it is rare to put it on c8. This is an example of what I mean by constructing our understanding of openings. My suspicion is that unless you had seen ...♘c8 before, ...♘a8 would be the choice of most Benoni players because ...♘a8-c7 in order to control b5 means something to players in a way that ...♘c8 doesn't, unless you look at the position more concretely.

16 ♗f4 ♗f8

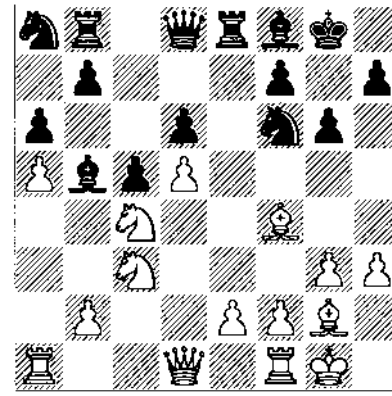
This retreat is usually a sign that something has gone wrong, but in this case White has to play cleverly to show it.

17 ♘c4 ♗b5 *(D)*

18 b3?!

A sensible idea. White anticipates Black's next move and keeps his position solid. However, this move also doesn't really threaten

W



anything, so Black should now have taken this chance to improve his position.

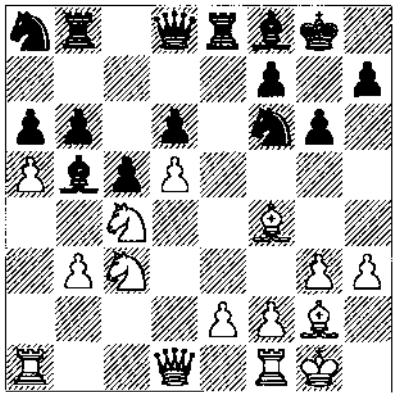
18 ♕b3!? ♕d7 19 e4 ♘h5 20 ♗e3 ♗xc4 21 ♕xc4 b5 22 axb6 ♖xb6 23 ♖xa6 ♖xb2 24 ♖b1 ♖xb1+ 25 ♘xb1 ♘c7 26 ♖a7 is a sample line showing how these sort of positions can turn out well for White. However, the counter-intuitive 18 ♕d3!? may be best, when Black cannot exploit the pin, and the queen is surprisingly well placed on d3, protecting c4 and e2, and retaining ideas of ♖fb1 and b4, and ♘xb5 and ♘a3.

18...b6?! *(D)*

Unlike the game above, here Carey is too fast with his queenside break. ("First you say I'm too slow, now you say I'm too fast – which is it?" Carey didn't ask this, but the difficulty in answering this question is highlighted in the distinction between knowledge and skill in Chapter 1.) There is no pressure on the centre here, so this would have been a good moment to improve the position of the passive f8-bishop and push White's f4-bishop away. After 18...♘h5! 19 ♗d2 ♗g7 I don't see any problems for Black. ...b6 will happen in due course, and this is currently an annoying threat because when White takes on b6 with the pawn, Black takes on c4 and when he recaptures on b6, the c4-pawn proves difficult to defend. On the other hand, if White takes with the knight, he loses the option of ♘a5, which is his main trump in the position. However, I have noticed that when I suggest a line like this to a student they often react by saying something like: "but I didn't want to put my knight on the rim" or, "I didn't see what the knight was doing on h5". In such

cases, all I can say is: **Beware of associating a move too closely with the piece that is moved rather than the position as a whole. Sometimes you must temporarily sacrifice the happiness of one piece in order to accomplish something elsewhere in the position.**

W



19 ♘xb5?

A strange decision, and all the more so because Gordon is familiar with the idea of ♘c4-a5. However, the move played makes sense in the context of the above game, in which Gordon won with the two bishops and a gradual advance on the kingside. This was still in his mind, and he was aiming for a similar position here. White should play 19 axb6 ♗xc4 (or 19...♘xb6 20 ♘a5!) 20 bxc4 ♘xb6 21 ♕d3, with full control of the position.

19...axb5 20 ♘xb6 ♘xb6 21 axb6 ♕xb6 22 ♕c2 ♗g7 23 ♖a2 ♘d7

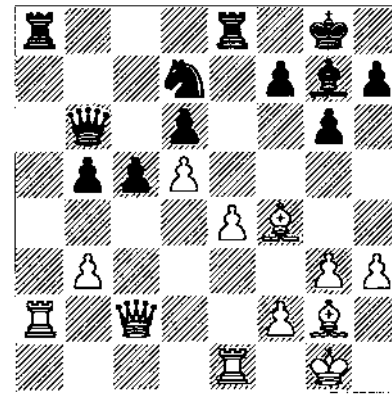
As a result of White's erroneous 19th move, Black has a significant advantage. Black faces no pressure in the centre, the g2-bishop is ineffectual and at the right moment he has the threat of playing ...c4 followed by ...b4.

24 e4 ♖a8 25 ♖e1 *(D)*

25...♖a5

This doesn't spoil much as it turns out, but I think Black should have stepped up a gear here and started to cause real problems. 25...c4!? is most thematic, but 26 bxc4 (26 b4 ♗d4 followed by ...♘e5 gives Black a big edge) 26...b4 27 ♗e3! complicates matters. Therefore I like 25...♗d4!. Carey found this move hard to get his head round, because he thought of this

B



'Modern Benoni bishop' solely in terms of the h8-a1 diagonal and given that ...♗d4 keeps it on the same diagonal, it is difficult to see why it improves Black's position. However, it improves Black's position in three main ways: by targeting f2, preparing ...♘e5 (which will no longer block the g7-bishop) and it is also designed to prepare ...c4 followed by ...b4 without allowing White to disturb his coordination by attacking the queen on b6. Therefore ...c4 is now a very serious threat. The only plausible defence for White seems to be 26 ♖b1 but after 26...c4 27 bxc4 b4 Black's position will get better and better.

26 ♖e2

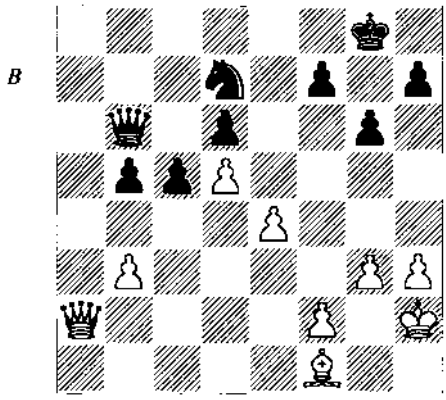
26 ♗d2!? looks more combative.

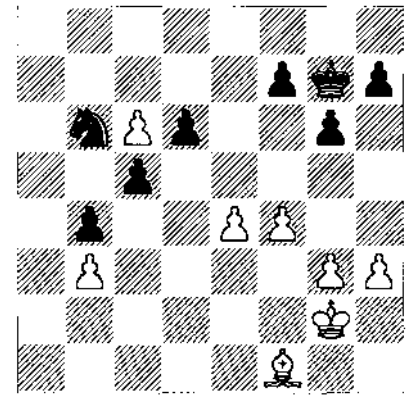
26...♖ea8 27 ♕b1 ♖a3 28 ♔h2 ♗f8?

Carey said that this idea (played for the second time in the game) was inspired by his study of Karpov's games, which, he rightly observed, often involve temporarily misplacing one piece so that the others can be deployed more actively. It's curious that he appreciated this idea with respect to the bishop, but not with respect to the knight (18...♘h5!). This may be because the example that gave him this idea was based on a bishop move, and he processed some of the context along with the pure idea, which makes applying it less reliable. However, in the given instance, this is a terrible move, and lets White get back into the game.

29 ♗c1 ♖3a6 30 ♗f1 ♗g7 31 ♖xa6 ♕xa6 32 ♗b2 ♗xb2 33 ♖xb2 ♕b6 34 ♖a2 ♖a5 35 ♕a1 ♖xa2 36 ♕xa2 *(D)*

36...♘e5





Even now 36...c4 is almost winning: 37 bxc4 b4 38 ♕a8+ ♔g7 39 ♕a1+ f6 40 ♔g2 b3 and I can't see a defence. Yet surprisingly neither player was really aware of this idea during the game. It's interesting to me that Carey missed it, because in these structures White's plan with f4, e5, ...dxe5, f5!? was familiar to him and this is a close equivalent of this plan for Black. I guess it gives further evidence that we do not always absorb chess ideas in a way that allows us to transfer them from one position to another, or even from one side of the board to the other!

37 ♔g2 b4?

37...c4 is still best. The given move doesn't allow Black's pieces to do any damage and White's light-squared bishop suddenly becomes a force to be reckoned with.

38 ♕a8+ ♔g7 39 f4 ♘d7 40 ♕c6 ♕xc6?

A losing blunder. Although Black has gone wrong, he can maybe still hold the position after 40...♕a7! 41 ♕xd6? (41 ♔h2!, allowing ♗g2 and the protection of the king, keeps some advantage) 41...♕a2+, when Black has enough counterplay to draw.

41 dxc6 ♘b6 *(D)*

42 ♔f2?

A strange blunder. Gordon has been defending for most of the game, and was so fixated by the threat of Black's pawns advancing that he misses the chance to make use of his own! 42 c7 threatening ♗a6 ends the game immediately because 42...c4 43 ♗xc4! is winning easily. How can we account for this blunder? It seems to me to be a question of the role-playing that comes out of telling stories about a position rather than analysing it move by move. We shall examine this issue in more detail in the next chapter. For now we can see that it is not a complicated variation. However, it is somewhat sudden for White to be winning, and I think Gordon probably hadn't fully adjusted here.

42...♘a8 43 ♔e3 ♘c7 44 ♔d3 ♔f6 45 ♔c4 ♔e7 46 e5 f6 47 exd6+ ♔xd6 48 ♗g2

Now the result hangs in the balance. It is not clear to me whether White can force a win if Black puts his kingside pawns on dark squares.

48...f5?

Now the g6-pawn is an easy target. 48...h6 49 ♗e4 g5 would improve Black's drawing chances but White may still be winning after 50 f5!?. This is an odd-looking move, but f6 is a target in the long term, and White needs to keep some pawns on the board, although even after this I'm not sure that White can win. (It's worth mentioning that this idea appealed to me because I was physically present when I watched Nikolić playing g4! against Gallagher in the game analysed at the end of Chapter 8.) After 50...♔e5 51 ♗f3 ♔d6 52 g4 ♘e8 53 ♔b5 ♘c7+ 54 ♔b6 ♘e8 55 ♗e2 ♘c7 56 ♗c4 ♘e8 57 ♔b7 ♘c7 58 ♗e6 ♘b5 it's hard to see a way through.

49 h4 h6 50 ♗f3 ♘e6 51 ♗d5 ♘d8 52 c7 1-0

Folk Psychology

Try everything once, except incest and folk dancing.
THOMAS BEECHAM

When you start to reflect on all the ideas you have about chess, you begin to wonder where you got them from in the first place. Most of them probably came from chess material you have read in books and magazines or conversations with people who have read similar material. Indeed, most players approach the game with ideas about chess that they have never consciously opted into. This is because learning to be a chess-player is not the same as 'learning chess': it is learning a culture, with all the attendant 'non-rational' meaning-making that goes with it (Bruner 1996). For most players, ideas of what constitutes 'a good move', an 'advantage', 'the initiative' or 'talent' are somehow implicit in their thoughts about players and positions, even though they have no idea of how those ideas got there in the first place and what exactly they mean.

These background ideas are largely benign, and we can't really function without them, but every so often it is useful to realize that you don't have to experience chess in the way you currently do. The first step towards experiencing chess differently is to raise awareness of some of the 'non-rational meaning-making' that you bring to the game. This effectively means trying to uncover your background assumptions about the game. These assumptions are difficult to see, because they grow out of a chess culture that now spans the globe, stretches across cyberspace, and reveals itself in the chess discourses we share with each other and read about in books and magazines. We are too steeped in these discourses to define them or locate them precisely, but they affect everything from the kinds of people the chess world attracts, the chess books people read, the language people use to talk about chess, the symbols we use to annotate games, our rating systems, our time-controls, etc. The types of things I have in mind are notions like White beginning the game with some advantage, that 'passive' play is bad, that it is more fun to attack than defend, that endings tend to be boring, that equal positions tend to be drawn, that strong players are strong because they know lots of things, that prophylaxis is deep, that tactics and strategy are different things, etc. These ideas are not facts but just the dominant chess discourses, and therefore they come to seem like the norm. One way to better understand these discourses is to think of them as the prevailing 'folk psychology'.

Folk psychology is perhaps best understood as the expectations that these discourses create, and refers to the set of background beliefs, assumptions, etc., that circumscribe what is deemed 'normal' and what is not. For instance, it is not normal for a 2000 player to beat two GMs in a row. It is not normal for Black to have the advantage if White seems to have done nothing wrong. It is not normal for world-class players to play unorthodox openings. It is not normal to exchange a rook for a bishop or knight in return for purely positional compensation, etc. The reason we need to be aware of folk psychology is that it defines what is normal, and this sense of normality leads us to make certain assumptions that are often unhelpfully limiting. Indeed, as a wise Indian lady once told me, when you 'assume', you make an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me'.

The following is my favourite expression of what folk psychology is, given by my current PhD supervisor, Guy Claxton: "Our 'folk psychology', woven out of landscape, language and a million subliminal events, forms the invisible filter through which we have to look ... We do not see this filter because we see through it. It is the unacknowledged background against which our mental life stands out in relief ... We say, "I'm sorry, I wasn't myself," without noticing what a curious view of personality is being implied. We say, "I changed my mind", without wondering who exactly it is that changed what (or what it was that changed whom) ..." – Claxton (1994).

In a chess context we have similarly curious expressions like "I just blundered" as if a blunder was ever just a blunder, "I lost the thread", as if there was a thread to be had, "I had attacking chances but somehow he escaped", as if attacking chances entailed an advantage by definition, etc. A world authority on folk psychology, Jerome Bruner, described not what folk psychology is, but what it does, in a way that I found readily applicable to chess, and I have adapted his account to chess as follows: "Chess

folk psychology continues to dominate the expectations and assumptions that chess-players bring to their games. And though chess folk psychology changes, it is extremely difficult to model these changes in any formal way. The heart of the matter is that chess folk psychology is rooted in a language ('counterplay', 'initiative', 'compensation') and a shared conceptual structure ('unclear', 'slightly better for White') that are steeped in psychological states – in our assumptions about the game, our desires for games and results to go a certain way, and our motivation to continue striving to improve. And because chess folk psychology is a reflection of chess culture, it partakes in the culture's way of valuing as well as its way of knowing. In fact, it must do so, for the culture's structures of value – its strategic rules, its training maxims, its social structures, including the hierarchical structures created by the rating system – serve to enforce chess folk psychology. Indeed, chess folk psychology in its turn serves to justify such enforcement." (Based on Bruner 1996)

I trust these accounts illustrate the relevance of folk psychology to chess, but one further example is useful to link folk psychology to the 'storytelling' in the next chapter. Another prominent commentator on folk psychology, Barker (examined in Bruner, 1990), tried to capture the way folk psychology operates with a 'principle of situatedness'; e.g., that people in post offices behave 'post office' – when we walk into a post office we go into a certain mode that is deemed normal for the post office – we put our stamps on the envelope, get in the queue, etc. – and we do this thinking it all to be entirely natural, when in fact someone coming from outside the culture would consider it to be highly bizarre and in need of explanation. Likewise, in a chess context people playing the Sicilian Sveshnikov behave 'Sicilian Sveshnikov' in that they are very relaxed about their position being full of holes, frequently sacrifice material to open lines, etc. For those who have played on either side of the Sveshnikov for a while, it all seems very normal to them, and they switch into that mode very naturally, but for those less familiar with the opening there seem to be a lot of weird things going on and these things need explaining.

This need to explain deviations from the norm makes some sense of how storytelling operates in chess (see Chapter 3). In the context of situatedness, the role of the story is to find an idea or interpretation that makes sense of any deviation from the canonical cultural pattern. If you do find yourself 'behaving Sicilian Sveshnikov' and then suddenly your opponent does something that does not seem 'normal' (like retreating the knight from d5 for no obvious reason), you have to start explaining things to yourself, and when that happens you are liable to do it in a narrative way, i.e. to start telling stories. Sometimes these will be good stories, sometimes bad, but it's well worth being aware of them, as the following chapter suggests.

Conclusions:

1) Chess-players, being human, are 'meaning-makers', and this explains why our approach to chess is more accurately described as 'psycho-logical' than logical.

2) Beware of the tendency to look for 'solutions' in chess. Unless your opponent is very cooperative, you will normally have to solve several problems during the game, rather than one big one that will make all subsequent decisions easy.

3) It is better to try to falsify your ideas than to verify them, i.e. with an "I'm not sure, let's see" attitude rather than "It's like this, I'll prove it".

4) Try not to become too attached to any particular idea of who you are as a chess-player, i.e. what your style is, what your openings are, etc. – this will usually get in the way of finding good moves.

5) Be mindful of chess folk psychology and the role it plays in the assumptions you make about the game.

3 Storytelling

The universe is made of stories, not atoms.
MURIEL RUKEYSER

'Once upon a...' Stop! That's too corny. How about 'One Saturday afternoon'? That's slightly better, but why not begin more directly, like saying that a young boy called Sam found a chessboard under a tree? OK, now we're off. Then (then what?) then he noticed, next to the board (ah here we go) a purple arrow painted on the grass, pointing inside a small hole in the tree. He squeezed his arm into the hole, and pulled out a carefully preserved wooden box with 32 pieces. There was also a large faded maple leaf inside the box, covered with what looked like blackcurrant dye. On one side of the leaf there was a map and on the other side there was a note that read: *The bearer of these pieces and associated board is instructed to walk, with all deliberate speed, to the largest chestnut tree in the meadow, overlooking the rickety bridge.* Sam was shocked, but he knew exactly where to go, and when he got there and squeezed inside he was astonished to find a chess tournament under way! The bulk of the players were squirrels, but there were also a few beavers, an otter, and there was even a formidable-looking badger wearing sunglasses on what looked like the top board. Sam also noticed an owl fluttering around, looking stern. He thought the owl might be some kind of arbiter, so Sam approached him, and asked whether he could take part in the tournament.

You may be wondering where I am going with this, and to be honest, so am I. It's just the start of a story that came out of my head when I put my fingers on the keyboard, but it seems important to set the scene of this chapter with a story, however random and underdeveloped. The point of this chapter is to show that storytelling, in one guise or another, has a profound role in our lives, and that this has a major impact on the way we think about chess positions during our games.

Culture is saturated with stories. They are obvious in books, soap operas and films, but they are also present in more subtle ways, for instance in adverts, in excuses for being late, or in the way we introduce friends. The reason for this is not merely that we like to tell stories, but that we cannot really think without them. *The Observer* literary editor, Robert Fulcrum, captured the ubiquity of stories with the quip that "The narrative gene is part of our cultural DNA". Taken literally, that doesn't make much sense, but note that it still has meaning for us, and it's true that stories are the lifeblood of any culture. Much of western culture and language has been derived from stories, including those in the Bible, from Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and more recently popular authors like J.K. Rowling (Harry Potter) and Dan Brown (*The Da Vinci Code*).

One of the main ways we organize the things that happen to us is by structuring them in a narrative form, which is a more formal way of saying: 'by telling stories about them'.

I have chosen to write primarily about 'narrative' in chess, rather than 'stories', because I think 'narrative' seems less pejorative, and alludes to the fact that while we are thinking about a position, we are in many ways narrators of our own games.

According to one prominent commentator on narrative, humans "dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, believe, doubt, plan, gossip, revise, remember, anticipate, learn, hope, despair, construct, criticize, hate and love by narrative" (Hardy 1968, cited in Egan 1997). But can we be more precise about the meaning of 'narrative'? We can, and I have chosen to do so by focusing on the main ways that narrative operates in a chess context.

Narratives are a meaning-making activity in the sense that we know we have reached the end

of narrative when we know how to feel about the events that made it up (Bruner 1990). In a chess context, this is reflected in the fact that when we are watching a game in progress and don't see the end of the game, we ask one of the players: "How did you get on?" which is another way of asking "How did the story end?" Similarly, the purpose of analysing your games closely is that it allows you to tell an accurate story about them, rather than some vague formulaic appraisal like saying that you 'just blundered', or 'didn't know the opening', or 'played without a plan', or some similar thoughtless opt-out that doesn't allow you to find meaning in the events of the game and the result they gave rise to.

Moreover, stories tend to have determinate meanings, and because we are so used to this, we often 'storify' events, i.e. we impose narrative order on narrative chaos. In a chess context this can manifest itself as coming to a conclusion about a position prematurely, because we can't handle not being able to tell a story about the chaos in front of us.

A further defining feature of narrative is 'temporality' or 'sequentiality' – the ordering of events in time. If you reverse two pieces of information in a narrative, the meaning will change. In a chess context this is often seen in the context of long variations involving competing attacks – the side that checks first often wins because their attack gains unstoppable momentum. If the variation was just slightly different, and the other side checked first, the whole meaning of the game would be different, and this is where the role of intermediate moves or zwischenzugs comes in.

However, the most relevant feature of narrative for chess-players, I believe, is the fact that the whole tends to make sense of the parts. It is often only at the end of a story that the elements leading up to the ending make sense, but it's not just the outcome that matters – 'the whole' means the background context and the expectations they give rise to. This background context can be our history against a certain opponent, the tournament context, or the opening we are playing and the kinds of narrative it tends to give rise to (e.g. Sicilian Dragon narratives include attacks on opposite sides, exchange sacrifices on c3, etc.).

Understanding that we create meaning through the interplay of wholes and parts is particularly important because it makes some sense of the difficulty we have in analysing the position in order to reach an assessment rather than deciding on the assessment and then looking for the variations to justify it.

From a narrative perspective, unless we are improvising completely, we need some kind of 'whole' (assessment, desired outcome, positional aim, psychological ploy) to make sense of the 'parts' of the game (moves, variations) but the problem is that we are not fully in control of the chess narrative. First of all there is an opponent who is also trying to impose his narrative on the game, and then the position will have its own 'story' to tell too! This means that we need to have a lot of dexterity. We need to be able to move between 'wholes' and 'parts' very fluidly; having a context for our variations, and a background to give them meaning, but also accepting that this background context is tentative, and that it might be changed completely by the discovery of a surprising 'part' (move) which may either be an unexpected resource for your opponent or a detail hidden from both players but relevant to the position all the same.

Finally, there is 'fabulation', which involves grabbing a few facts and then spinning a narrative web around them, often with the aim of trying to prove something to yourself. This usually means that the facts are distorted by the supporting narrative.

Now that we have a slightly clearer idea of the features of narrative, and the part they play in chess, it should be possible to give clear examples of these phenomena in practice and make some conclusions about what this means for players trying to improve their play. However, getting further clarity is not easy.

One of the main proponents of the centrality of narrative, former Harvard professor Jerome Bruner, framed the problem like this: "Narrativized realities, I suspect, are too ubiquitous, their construction too habitual or automatic to be accessible to easy inspection. We live in a sea of stories, and like the fish who (according to the

proverb) will be the last to discover the water, we have our own difficulties grasping what it is like to swim in stories. It is not that we lack competence in creating our narrative accounts of reality – far from it. We are, if anything, too expert. Our problem, rather, is achieving consciousness of what we so easily do automatically ..." (Bruner 1996).

One of the reasons it is difficult to explain the wider picture of storytelling is that this 'sea of stories' that Bruner says we are swimming in is not so much in the outside world, but an emergent property that arises from our interaction with the world and our attempts to make sense of it. Indeed, research into varied states of consciousness has discovered that "Images observed long enough will cease to be random or disconnected and will organize into symbolic dramas, narratives, or problem-solving processes. Fiction and Drama may be manifestations of this inherent tendency, which is why I often say that if novels didn't exist, the brain would have to invent them. We are storied and storying beings to our core." (Houston 1996).

So how do 'storied and storying beings' make sense of a game like chess?

Chess Narratives

I think of chess narratives as the background 'noise' that permeate our thoughts during play and this 'noise' is often sufficiently loud that it operates as the *context* of our thoughts. For instance, if you probe the advice 'counter an attack on the wing with play in the centre' for a few seconds, you can imagine someone telling a story about the game, with that as the basis of the plot. Narratives are the guiding stories that give us a sense of what we are trying to do and why. They come in various forms, as we shall see below. While nobody is immune to these narratives, very few use them to guide themselves towards the correct moves. Many players get lost in these stories, trapped by their own narrative, and completely lose track of the objective state of affairs on the board.

When I came to appreciate the ubiquity of stories, it occurred to me that becoming a better player might be a matter of learning to tell better stories. That may sound obscure, but think carefully about the different elements that make a story good. These vary somewhat, but usually a good story is one that gives us the firm feeling that we understand most of what is happening and why. There may be some unresolved issues and surprises in store, but we are not confused or bewildered as we consider it. Analogously, **I think a good chess narrative is one where your assessments and your variations make sense of each other**. Moreover, a good story usually has events that make sense of the story up to that point. So trading queens to try to exploit a positional advantage in the ending retains narrative coherence, but blundering your queen for no good reason does not. **Finally, a good story is always somewhat uncertain. The story should be open to variant readings, with some space left for the reader to imagine things differently. In a chess context, this means that you need to leave space for your opponent's version of events, and also think of the story the position is trying to tell you, before letting your own story dominate your thoughts. If you manage to do this, your assessments should become a little more tentative, and this usually helps you to make better decisions.** (Of course this is very much in line with what I was arguing in the previous chapter about the importance of trying to falsify your ideas, rather than trying to verify them.)

Perhaps a few examples of work with my students will help to place these claims in context.

Vague Narratives

I feel very fortunate that I frequently have the opportunity to observe or take part in the post-mortems of strong grandmasters. I particularly enjoy watching a player I admire demonstrate one of his favourite games because these demonstrations give you a wonderful insight into the hidden variations off-stage and the exquisite sensitivity to detail in certain lines that can

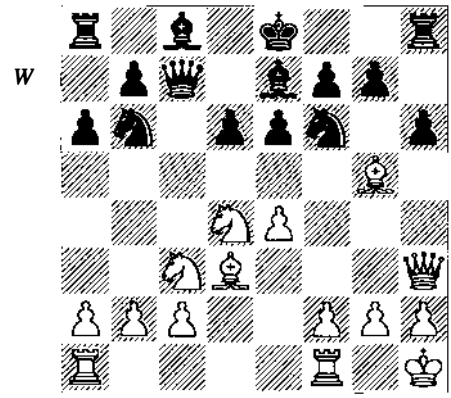
change an assessment completely. I think what I really enjoy about these demonstrations is the feeling that I am being told a story. At their best, these stories involve a narrator who gives his pieces rich characters, sends them off on precarious adventures, mourns their inevitable loss, but triumphs in the end in a way that makes sense, not only of the outcome, but of how things could have been different. Such stories are brimming with detail and a pleasure to behold.

However, if a story lacks detail, it usually leaves us feeling pretty flat. We are not able to identify with the characters or plot in a way that we would if there were more effort made to describe the characters and scenes with care and attention. In chess, vagueness is usually a result of laziness at the board, where ideas and variations are considered in general terms, without sufficient attention to detail. For instance, vague plans tend to sound like this: "I'll close the position and squeeze him with my extra space" or "I'll give him a check and then attack him with my rooks" or "I'll trade queens and start manoeuvring". I find that this kind of vagueness is surprisingly common among players below international level. The descriptions of ideas invariably take a very general and loose form rather than tight move-by-move commentary. For instance, one of my students often says things like: "Ah, now I can move my pieces *over there*" or "the queenside is *a tricky place* for my knight". These kind of loose observations are often the basis for a vague plan, but what I find curious is that the vague plan is often connected to a clear idea of how things will develop! In other words, my impression is that **many players get into trouble because they have definitive assessments and vague ideas when what you want is clear ideas and revisable assessments – almost the exact opposite!**

'Pavel' – 'Titan19'

ICC (60 minutes each) 2002

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 a6 6 ♗g5 e6 7 ♗d3?! ♗e7 8 0-0 ♕c7 9 ♕f3 ♘bd7 10 ♕h3 h6 11 ♔h1 ♘b6 *(D)*



There is a lot happening in this position and plenty to think about, but Alan Dunn, my student, explained his previous move as follows: "11...♘b6, *with the grand plan of castling queenside and using the position of his queen to storm the kingside.*" There is little wrong with the move, or even the concept, but **whenever you hear yourself think thoughts as colourful as '*storm the kingside*', be careful!** It sounds to me like a narrative of desire and conquest rather than something that will help you find good moves. The 'Grand Plan' is a good way to describe it because it is really too grand. As a rule of thumb, I think it is wise to **be extra suspicious of any plan that takes more than three moves to implement**. It's not that you can't make long-term plans, but just that your opponent will usually obstruct them in some way, so anything that takes more than two or three moves at a time to complete requires an extra-careful look to see how the opponent will intercept your idea.

12 ♖fd1 ♗d7 13 ♘b3 0-0-0 14 ♗e3

Now things have settled down a bit – but everything is still going according to the 'Grand Plan' so the next move is predictable.

14...g5?!

Again nothing much wrong with the idea, but it was time to take a time-out from the main story. Alan should have introduced the 'subplot' of the black king needing to find shelter on the queenside before the 'storm' begins on the kingside. 14...♔b8! looks sounder and is obviously the right move when you 'talk to your pieces'.

15 ♕f3 ♘c4?

Now White creates some initiative. 15...♔b8! 16 ♕e2 ♖c8 was called for, when everything is in order.

16 ♗xc4 ♕xc4 17 ♗b6!

Now the rook should be going to c8, but remember the story: why would the rook be on c8 when the story of the position is '*using the position of the white queen to storm the kingside*'? This is an example of what is meant by the whole giving meaning to the parts. In the context of the story (the whole) the idea of ...♖c8 (a part) is filtered out.

17...♖dg8

Now 'the storm' is just waiting to happen and the rooks are ideally poised to support it. Unfortunately, White has his own ideas:

18 ♖d4! ♕c6 19 ♖b4 g4?!

19...d5 was called for, but that wasn't part of the plan. In any case, 20 ♘a5 ♕d6 21 ♖b3 is still extremely strong.

20 ♕d3 d5 21 ♘a5 ♗xb4

21...♕d6

ning for White, but Al says that he didn't even see 21...♕d6 – I guess he didn't have time to adjust to being a defender when he had thought that he would be storming the kingside by now.

22 ♘xc6 ♗xc6 23 exd5 ♘xd5 24 ♘xd5 ♗xd5 25 ♕g3!

Ouch!

1-0

Opening Narratives

As I suggested in Chapter 2, we tend to be rather attached to our openings, and part of the reason for this is that each opening is a kind of story in itself. When I was about 15, and rated around 2300, I remember playing a rapid game against a 1900 player who played the Accelerated Dragon. I remember it was the line 1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 g6 5 c4 ♗g7 6 ♗e3 ♘f6 7 ♘c3 ♘g4 8 ♕xg4 ♘xd4 9 ♕d1 ♘e6 and that Black later played ...♕a5 and ...g5. I particularly remember that at some moment my opponent played ...

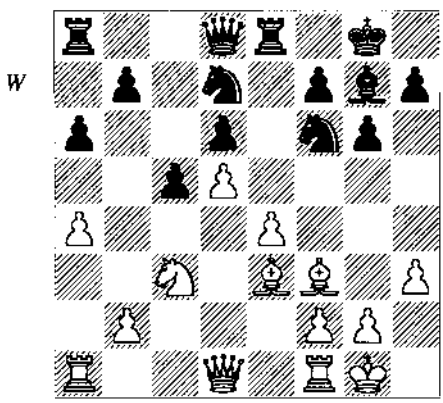
gested after the game (which I won) that this might have been a mistake because it is useful to have the option of castling. My opponent looked at me like I was a complete idiot and said: "No, no, Black doesn't castle in this line." I tried not to take it personally and suggested that even if he doesn't normally castle, it's still useful to have the option because you never know when you might suddenly want to connect your rooks. "No, no" he said, "you don't connect your rooks in this line".

I decided not to challenge him on turf that was clearly close to his heart. In this case, he had no doubt learned that Black doesn't have to castle in this particular line of the Accelerated Dragon, which is true and makes sense, but he had become rather too attached to the idea of not castling and had rigidly associated that idea with the opening, thus limiting his legitimate options considerably. This is an extreme example of how narrative influences our play in the opening, again in the sense that the whole (the Accelerated Dragon) influenced his judgement of a part (castling) but in a way that wasn't fully justified. The following is another example of an 'Opening Narrative'.

Epp – Theil

Boylston Chess Club rapidplay, Boston 2002

1 ♘f3 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 ♗g7 4 d4 c5 5 d5 e6 6 e4 exd5 7 cxd5 d6 8 ♗e2 0-0 9 0-0 ♗g4 10 h3 ♗xf3 11 ♗xf3 a6 12 a4 ♘bd7 13 ♗e3?! ♖e8 *(D)*



Carey Theil's comment was "I liked my position here". I think the two reasons for this view

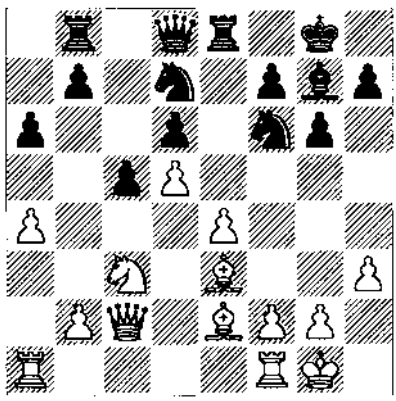
were that he has achieved the aim of exchanging his queen's bishop for the f3-knight with some assistance from White (h3) and White's last move was far from threatening. However, although these factors should give Black a comfortable game, he is by no means clearly better yet. Carey added that his other thought was that he wanted to keep the bishop on f3 at this stage (I guess because as long as it is there, Black is not going to get blown away in the centre).

14 ♕c2 ♖b8

If the aim was to keep the bishop on f3, 14...♕e7 makes sense, but most Benoni players know that the queen is rarely well placed on e7 because when f4 and e5 does eventually come, White can often meet ...dxe5 with d6! and gain a tempo on the queen. However, this kind of reservation is a bit like the "*never* castle in this line" above. Carey was not really looking at the position, he was trying to play a Benoni, with all the attendant ideas that this brings. It's true that the queen is not so well placed on e7 in most lines of the Benoni, but here it makes sense in terms of what Black was trying to do. The 'part' (14...♕e7) should have been allowed to trump the whole (the Benoni guideline about not putting the queen on e7).

15 ♗e2 *(D)*

B

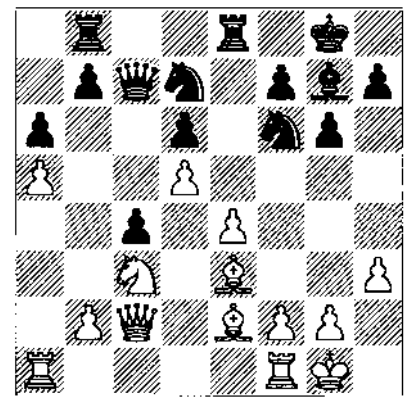


15...♕c7?!

Carey was still happy with his position, but he was not really looking at it or trying to understand it. What does Black do in the Modern Benoni? He tries to play ...b5 and ...c4 and win on the queenside. That's the Benoni narrative that Carey was following here. When we learn an opening, we have usually have an idea of what a perfect game with that opening should look like. For instance, D.Byrne-Fischer, New York 1956 in the Grünfeld, and Piket-Kasparov, Tilburg 1989 in the King's Indian. In this case, Carey had a vision of ...c4, ...b5, ...♘c5 and a timely strike. However, although Black should normally play primarily on the queenside in these lines, the position is ripe for Black to play on the kingside: 15...♕e7! 16 f3 ♘h5! gives Black complete dark-square control and an excellent position. However, these moves (...♕e7 and ...♘h5) are relatively unusual for a Benoni and can only be found when you are not 'trapped in the narrative'.

16 a5 c4? *(D)*

W



Carey was still happy with his position, and since he has played a lot of moves that are consistent with the Benoni narrative, while his opponent has made a couple of slightly unusual ones, he was looking for a move that was consistent with the story that he is better. This is the only move that fits that bill. Unfortunately, it is a big error, and it stemmed not so much from missing White's next move as from the erroneous narrative that what was happening here was that Black was better and was increasing his advantage. Indeed, Carey told me that he had seen White's next move and the immediate follow-up, but the final move was a complete shock. His story was that he was better and was playing all the right moves. Therefore that final (winning) move was screened out because it

wasn't consistent with all the other thoughts in his head.

17 ♖a4! ♘c5 18 ♖xc4 ♕xa5

Carey's exact words were: "When I was thinking about 16...c4 I stopped here in my analysis and went back to look at more interesting lines"(!)

19 b4

Alas, White wins a piece.

1-0

'Reading' the Position and 'Writing' the Position

The reason it is important for chess-players to be aware of our tendency to tell stories is that is very easy to forget that the story we are telling about the position is not the only relevant story to consider.

It is true that we are in some sense author of our own games, but we also have to deal with a co-author, who in turn has to deal with us. Moreover, both players have to 'read' the position to understand what is going on, and amend their own stories accordingly. My sense is that a good story during play is therefore one that leaves space for the possibility that the 'co-author' might see things differently, and also one that respects the limitations of the characters in the story – e.g. if there is a knight on h1, don't write a script in which he has to get to f3 in two moves.

Many writers say that their best stories somehow 'come through' them rather than being created by them, in that the characters they 'created' take on a life of their own. Chess is a bit like that too in that sometimes we need to surrender authorship of the story to the position itself and let the position tell us its story, before we tell it ours.

We are therefore both authors and readers of our own games, and we are up against a co-author and co-reader. This is not the only way to frame the chess contest, but I find it a useful way to think about subjectivity and objectivity in chess. As I wrote in the chapter on Egoism in *7DCS*, I don't think we can ever be fully 'objective' during our games and that what we should strive for instead is a perspective that is more 'inter-subjective'. In light of the role of narrative, and its relevance for chess, I would now say that the key for me is to remember that I am not simply the author of my games (subjective) but rather a co-author (inter-subjective) and that my play improves when I consider the views of my co-author. Moreover, I am not only an author, but also a reader, and that while I am reading the position I need to suspend my ideas of how the game should develop, and let the position guide me (make me more objective) more often.

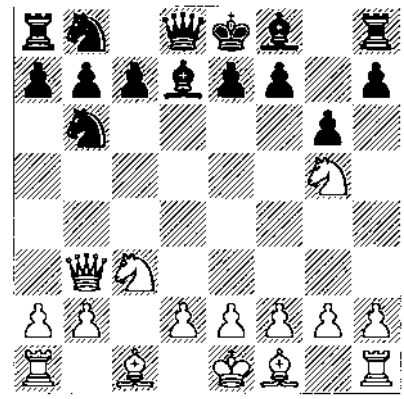
Fabulation

The technical term is fabulation. You make up a story to cover the facts you don't know or can't accept. You keep a few true facts and spin a new story around them.
JULIAN BARNES

The role of storytelling in chess is perhaps most obvious in the stories we tell ourselves during the games about why we are doing what we are doing, and after the games, about why we did what we did.

Korchnoi – Rowson
Port Erin 2004

1 ♘f3 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 cxd5 ♘xd5 5 ♕a4+ ♗d7 6 ♕b3 ♘b6 7 ♘g5!? *(D)*



I have noticed that Korchnoi often plays strangely in the opening. He seems to relish posing his opponent unconventional problems and doesn't seem overly concerned with the objective merits of his ideas.

7...e6 8 d4 ♗c6! 9 ♗e3

9 ♗f4!? was mentioned by Golubev, although you wonder whether Fritz might have been involved when you see the idea: 9...♕xd4? 10 ♘xe6! fxe6 11 ♕xe6+ ♗e7 12 ♗e5.

9...♗g7 10 ♖d1

I thought for a while here. I didn't want to castle because he would obviously enjoy playing h4. 10...♘d5 is possible but in the end I opted for...

10...♘8d7

"What is the point of this move?" asked Korchnoi after the game. "The main idea is to play ...♘f6-d5 and take control of the light squares on the queenside" I replied. He nodded and then said: "I understand", so I guess he was just testing me.

11 ♘f3

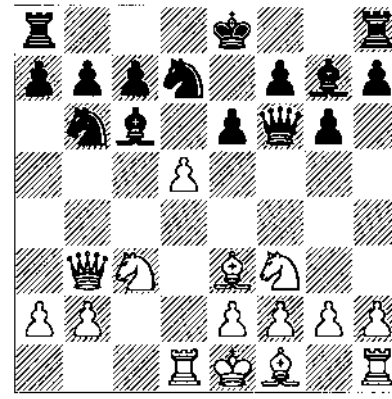
I felt an unhelpful jolt of optimism after this move. This **'jolt of optimism'** is one of the main psychological traps we have to look out for in chess because it tends to colour our assessment of the position and often leads to mistakes. In any case, I was tense before this game, but by this stage I was really enjoying myself. I was thrilled to be playing the great man, and excited to be competing with him in such a rich and strange position. However, now I had to deal with the annoying threat of ♗g5 followed by e4 or e3, when White is at least not worse. I considered lots of moves here but nothing appeared to meet the demands of the position fully; e.g., 11...h6 12 ♗c1!, 11...♘d5 12 ♗g5, or 11...0-0 12 h4!. At some level I knew that I should take his knight on f3, but when I saw 11...♗xf3 12 gxf3 ♕h4 13 ♘e4 I somehow went off the idea because I didn't like the prospect of ♗g5. Then suddenly I saw a curious move that seemed to make sense and it fitted my mood perfectly!

11...♕f6?

This bizarre-looking move is far too clever to be good. It amounts to a radical solution to the problem of White moving his bishop from e3 and then moving his e-pawn. After 12 ♗g5 ♕f5 or 12 ♗c1 ♕f5 my idea would work splendidly and White would be struggling for moves. However, unfortunately the e3-bishop has a hidden destination.

12 d5! *(D)*

B

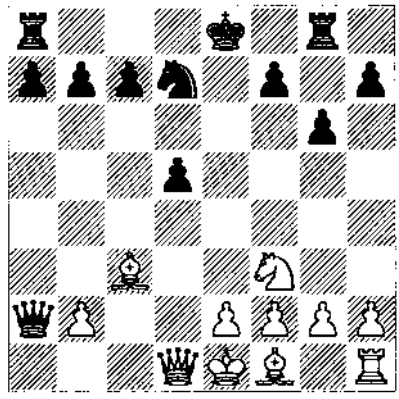


This move is not particularly deep or difficult, yet I was taken aback by the fact that Korchnoi played it within a minute. When I completed the move 11...♕f6, he didn't laugh or scowl (as he has been known to), but he did furrow his brow as if to say "that can't be right" and then he looked again for just a few seconds, during which time I realized what was about to hit me. Then it happened. As soon as he saw the move there was not a trace of hesitation that it was the right one. This sense of conviction made a lasting impression and I believe it helped me to win a game later in the same tournament (Rowson-Sarakauskas in Chapter 7).

12...♘xd5 13 ♘xd5 ♗xd5! 14 ♖xd5! exd5 15 ♗d4 ♕f5 16 ♗xg7 ♖g8 17 ♗c3 ♕b1+ 18 ♕d1 ♕xa2 *(D)*

Although it could be argued that I have material parity, my position is close to lost. My king has no safe abode, my queen is offside and I have no dark-square control. I fought back quite well, but just when it seemed like I might be beginning to solve my problems, he had a deep think and unleashed some devastating tactics.

19 e3 0-0-0 20 ♗e2 ♘c5 21 0-0 ♘e4 22 ♕c2 ♖d6 23 ♗d4 ♖e8 24 ♘e5 f6 25 ♘d3 ♖c6 26 ♕d1 ♕a5 27 b4 ♕a2 28 ♘c5 a6 29 ♘xe4 dxe4 30 b5! ♖c2 31 bxa6 c5



The variation 31...♖xe2 32 a7 ♔d7 33 ♗b2+! is a nice illustration of Korchnoi's genius.

32 axb7+ ♔b8 33 ♗xf6 ♖d2 34 ♗c4 ♖xd1 35 ♗xa2 ♖xf1+ 36 ♔xf1 ♔xb7 37 ♗f7 ♖f8 38 ♗d5+ ♔b6 39 ♗c3 ♔b5 40 ♗xe4 ♔c4 41 ♗e5 ♖e8 42 f4 ♔b3 43 ♔e2 ♖d8 44 g4 c4 45 f5 gxf5 46 gxf5 c3 47 ♗d4 ♖c8 48 ♗d5+ ♔b4 49 ♔d1 1-0

Now, playing Korchnoi is a very special occasion, especially if you have never played him before. After an unusual game like that one, and an engaging post-mortem, lots of people wanted to ask me about the experience. My description of the game was roughly as follows: he played an irregular opening, I got a little bit overcreative in response and played a clever move which turned out to be a blunder... I remember giving this description a few times and at this point I would mention the move 11...♕f6 and whoever was listening would interject: "Ah! So you missed 12 d5?" and I would quickly react: "No! I saw 12 d5, but I missed that he could take twice on d5 after that", which sounds plausible, but was, in fact, a complete lie.

I am perhaps being too hard on myself, and it seems fairer to call it a self-deception. I think the first time I told this story I was trying to protect my ego and preserve the special status of the game. I deeply rebelled against the thought that I could spoil a game against a living legend with a crude blunder so early in the game. So I told a story about the game instead, and one that made it sound more meaningful. This story amounted to saying: he was creative and I was creative. But I was so creative that I got carried away, and although I saw his key move (because, hey, I'm a grandmaster), I missed the follow-up (because, hey, nobody's perfect).

What struck me most about this fabulation is that by the third or fourth time I gave this version of events I had come to believe it myself! Even when I spoke to my girlfriend that night I told her something similar. It was only when I put the game into my computer that I faced up to the fact that I had simply missed 12 d5. I did see it, but only *after* I played 11...♕f6, and immediately after I played 11...♕f6 I felt that 12 d5 wasn't so serious (relief) but then I saw 14 ♖xd5 (ouch!) and, perhaps in order to keep my confidence intact for the rest of the game, I told myself that this was what I had missed.

I offer this confession now in the hope that it will encourage readers to be more honest with themselves. Self-deception, almost by definition, is a very tricky phenomenon, but I believe it is very closely associated with our tendency to frame our experience in narrative terms. It makes sense that we have evolved to create stories that seem coherent or intriguing when our actual experiences are often incoherent, and threatening to our sense of self.

Conclusions:

1) One of the ways we try to make sense of what is happening during play is to tell stories about the position, and how it will develop. This is because it is a natural human trait to organize experience into a narrative form.

2) Narratives that help you to play well will normally have a fair amount of detail, but also some uncertainty, because you need to leave some space for the position to tell you its story too!

3) Self-deception is very common in chess, and one of the forms it takes is 'fabulation' in which we spin a narrative web around a few selected facts in order to feel good about something, even if the truth of the matter is rather different!

4 Which Myth are You Playing By?

The next time that somebody tells you that something is a myth, reflect on the ways in which that myth might still be true. Coming from Scotland, I can state with confidence that our Loch Ness Monster doesn't literally exist, but not that he doesn't exist at all. He certainly exists as a myth, and continues to have reality for anyone who visits Loch Ness and entertains even the slightest doubt that a majestic creature, preferably with a tartan hat, might surface at any moment. Moreover, I have never come across a unicorn in the flesh, and I know that even if a rhino gets frisky (and lucky) with a horse, I am unlikely to see one. But can we really say that unicorns don't exist at all? That seems wrong, for they do exist in our mythology. And then there is Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and much else besides.

In fact, the more we think of things that don't literally exist, but still influence our view of the world, the more we see that our perceptual lives are fuelled by our imaginations, and that myth is one of the strongest currencies of the imagination. 'Nessie' may not be real, but being fascinated by monsters is real. You won't find a unicorn on a farm, but the ideals of beauty and innocence might be there. Santa Claus doesn't distribute Christmas presents around the world, but the idea of a benevolent father figure who rewards our good behaviour is alive and well.

But myths are much more than non-existent creatures. Joseph Campbell, perhaps the most famous popular writer on mythology, puts it as follows: "The dictionary definition of a myth would be: stories about gods. But, in this context, what exactly is a god? A god is a personification of a motivating power or a value system that functions in human life..." (Campbell 1991). It is in this sense of 'myth' that Campbell poses the famous question: "Which myth are you living by?" He is asking: in the story of your life, what kind of character do you play? What are the 'motivating powers' of this character? What are the hidden potentials you hope to unleash? Given what I said in the last chapter about the way we organize our experience narratively, it is a small but important further step to make the claim that chess is inherently mythical.

This claim takes many forms. First of all there are chess *archetypes*, certain forms of ideals that we seek to emulate. Most of these chess archetypes will be personified by a famous player, but they might also be personified by anybody we admire or feel inspired by – perhaps even a club rival, or a chess teacher. In any case, I believe that many of our decisions are based on our attempts to emulate a certain ideal. For several years now, I have noticed a kind of 'glory hunting' in my students, as if they were trying to experience the heroic through their actions on the chessboard. On reflection, this seems understandable. Although chess is a lot like life in some ways, it is also far removed from the mundane nature of everyday existence. It offers us a magical sphere of activity where we experience aspects of ourselves that we may not otherwise be able to express. Many chess-players spend much of their time away from the game in jobs that may be rewarding in a variety of ways, but without offering many opportunities for self-expression and even fewer for the experience of combat or glory.

A striking example of this motivation for playing chess came from a doctor whom I taught online. His work involved treating patients with life-threatening illnesses. This sounds so much more important than chess, but he complained that much of his work was just implementing tried and tested procedures and that most of the time he felt like a 'fax machine'. He sought chess lessons, he said, because he wanted to create something beautiful before he died, and thought that chess gave him the best chance of

doing this. This example might seem relatively extreme, but I do think that chess functions as a mythic sphere of life for many players.
just a game, but a zone of existence where we try to live out stories that are more dramatic than normal and in which we can play a fuller and more exhilarating role.

Moreover, when Campbell describes a god as the personification of a motivating power or a value system it is reasonable to think of Fischer, for instance, as a 'god'. For me, he personified the will to win and embodied the value of determination. Then it all unravels: Tal was 'The Magician', Karpov – 'The Python', Petrosian – 'Iron Tigran', Botvinnik – 'The Patriarch'. It seems that all of these players are 'gods' in the sense that Campbell has in mind. I believe these role models operate as 'motivating powers', even when we are not fully aware of it. During play, we may not think "what would Tal do now?", but it is the most basic of human traits to try to emulate, and I suspect we are often unconscious of the extent to which this is happening.

Myths and Style

Style? I've got no style.
ANATOLY KARPOV

There is an argument that most players should focus on their mistakes rather than their style since in most positions the issue is not whether a move is positional or tactical, defensive or aggressive; the biggest issue is whether it is good!

I agree with this argument, and I am particularly keen to challenge the positional player/tactical player dichotomy as good chess involves both equally, to the extent that the distinction dissolves.

However, I believe the perspective of myth sheds some light on the issue of playing style that might actually be useful. This came to mind while I was watching a 'professional blitz player' outside *Au Bon Pain* café in Harvard Square. He had a cardboard poster tacked on to his table and it had lots of drawings of fireworks and captions in the old Batman style reading: "Kapow!" "Splat!", etc. And then in big writing there was: "Play the Chess Wizard". It seemed to me that the 'Wizard' angle was a bit more than a marketing ploy – this was part of his chess identity. As I suggested in Chapter 2, chess-players usually have chess identities. It's very important for most people to be able to say something to the effect of 'this is who I am as a chess-player'. Not just 'this is my rating' but also 'I am an attacker', 'I am a positional player', 'I don't calculate variations, I just play by intuition', etc.

It's a short step from that to finding a strong player to emulate, and a 'style' to call your own. You might think of yourself as *'the trickster'* and believe that chess is all about tactics. The trickster sees strategy as a bit pretentious and usually irrelevant because most games are decided by tricks. Similarly, *'the grinder'* thinks tactics are somehow 'dirty' in that they get in the way of good and clear strategy. Both 'styles' are disastrous for good chess, but they both arise from an idealization of chess that is mythical in character.

The Sacrificial Attacker

To begin to illustrate this theme, I offer some of the games I played around the age of 18-20. I was already a decent IM, rated between 2400 and 2450, and was striving to become stronger. However, I swam in a motivational stream infested with ideals that I was not yet strong enough to embody, and, alas, I often drowned.

I used to enjoy Tal's games and was seduced by his sacrificial style. Without fully realizing it, I kept on trying to emulate his musky aura of sacrificial genius in my games, often with comical results:

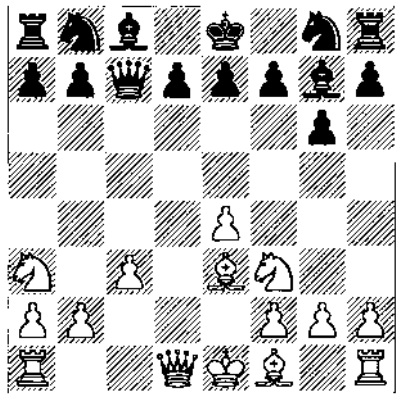
Rowson – Malakhov
European Junior Ch, Holon 1995

I remember Malakhov was second seed at this event so this game was played on the demo boards. This was one of my earliest experiences of playing on demo boards, and I wonder if this contributed to my desire to be a hero.

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 g6 3 d4 ♗g7 4 dxc5 ♕a5+ 5 c3

I now think that White's best chance for an advantage against 2...g6 is to play this move a bit earlier! However, here I think it is best because after 5 ♘c3 ♗xc3+ 6 bxc3 ♕xc3+ 7 ♗d2 ♕xc5 8 ♗d3 d6 9 0-0 ♘f6 10 ♖b1 ♘bd7 I feel that White's compensation is a bit vague, and I would rather be Black.

5...♕xc5 6 ♗e3 ♕c7 7 ♘a3 *(D)*



7...♘c6

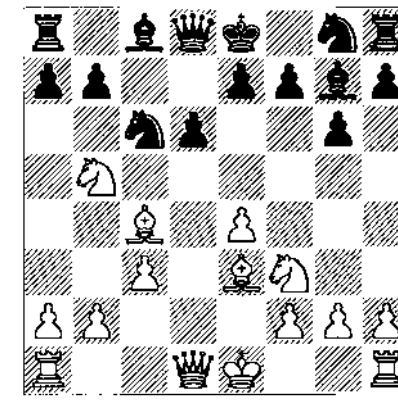
Black can play 7...♗xc3+!? 8 bxc3 ♕xc3+ and 9...♕xa3. I hadn't even noticed this possibility until Malakhov pointed it out after the game. At first I assumed White would have more than ample compensation for the material, but two pawns is no trifle and I wouldn't be in a hurry to allow this in future. That said, I overheard Polish/US GM Wojtkiewicz saying that anyone playing 7...♗xc3+ would be a good example of what Kasparov meant by some players having "a lack of chess culture".

Even so, Luke McShane put it to me that such a move will either be played with very superficial intentions (I'm two pawns up and can soak up the compensation) or more profound intentions (White has massive compensation but it's worth two pawns and in the process of returning the material I will get a decent position) and this seems right to me, regardless of whether it is objectively a good idea.

8 ♘b5 ♕d8 9 ♗c4

9 ♘bd4 ♘f6 10 ♘xc6 bxc6 11 e5 ♘d5 (11...♘g4 12 ♗f4 ♕c7 13 ♕e2) 12 ♗d4 looks fairly unclear.

9...d6 *(D)*



Although my opponent's opening was somewhat offbeat, and I felt I had played all the right moves until now, Black is still perfectly OK and the game should proceed along conventional channels. However, feeling 'fully mobilized' and 'ready for action' (note the narrative feel to those words) I was already looking for ideas based on some combination of ♕b3, ♗xf7+ and ♘g5. This is all consistent with 'the sacrificial attacker myth'.

10 e5?

10 ♕b3 ♘a5 11 ♕b4 a6 12 ♘bd4 (12 ♘xd6+ exd6 13 ♗b6 ♘c6 14 ♗xd8 ♘xb4) 12...♘xc4 13 ♕xc4 ♘f6 is comfortable for Black so I should probably just play the solid 10 ♘bd4!? and take it one move at a time.

10...a6!

When we get too involved in our myths, we often place emphasis on the lines where our myth is actualized and much less on the lines where it is thwarted. In this case, I spent most of my time analysing/expecting/hoping that he would play 10...♘xe5, when I can at least create some mess with 11 ♘xe5 ♗xe5 (not 11...dxe5? 12 ♗xf7+! – the sort of line that excites you, and makes you want to play in this way) 12 ♕b3 e6 13 0-0-0 with some excitement for the sacrificed material.

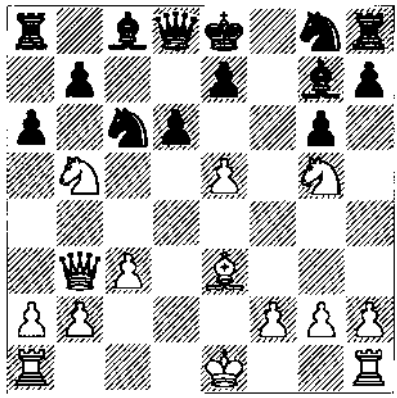
11 ♗xf7+?

Required by the myth, but clearly unsound. However, I am already in too deep: 11 ♘bd4 ♘xe5 12 ♘xe5 dxe5 gives White nothing but regret. Tal was often 'in too deep' to turn back

too, but he usually had more resources to work with in the depths.

11...♔xf7 12 ♘g5+ ♔e8 13 ♕b3 *(D)*

B



I felt fairly excited by the prospect of this position, because I saw ♕f7+, ♗b6 'things', and ♘f7 and ♘xh8 when g8 will be hanging. I saw all those delicious treats and was too strongly seduced by them to think carefully about plausible defences. Actually I am just a piece down, with another one hanging. Moreover, to give a full account of how far off-target I was, I felt something along the lines of "I'll always have a draw with ♕f7+ and ♕e6+, if he's lucky"(!)

13...♘xe5 14 ♘d4

That's a big juicy square on e6, but Black has no major weaknesses and, ahem, an extra piece.

14...♗f6! 15 ♘xh7 d5! 16 ♘xf6+ ♘xf6 17 0-0-0

Here I remember I was still pretending to attack, as if this was somehow all part of the plan, even though I now knew that my attack had been refuted.

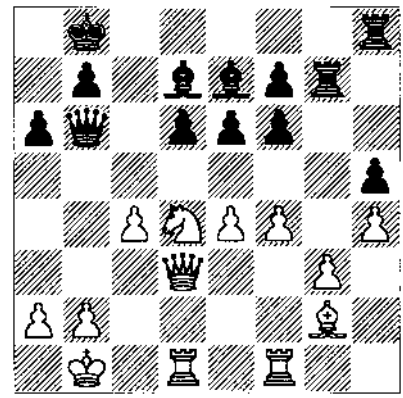
17...♔f7 18 f3 ♘c4 19 ♗f2 ♕c7 20 g3 e5 21 ♘e2 ♗e6 22 g4 d4

And now it was clear that the hunter had become the hunted. And since the hunted was also a piece down, he decided to resign.

0-1

You might think that I would have learned from that drastic example, but a few months later I was still subject to the same kind of myth-making:

W



Rowson – Am. Rodriguez
Erevan Olympiad 1996

The position is finely balanced. However, here I had the misplaced idea that everything was ready for a decisive breakthrough. I was already around 2450 at this Olympiad, so I think I had enough understanding to see that the position was not ready for this sort of violence. But myths are very powerful, especially the sacrificial attacker myth, and I couldn't help but try to embody that myth in this game:

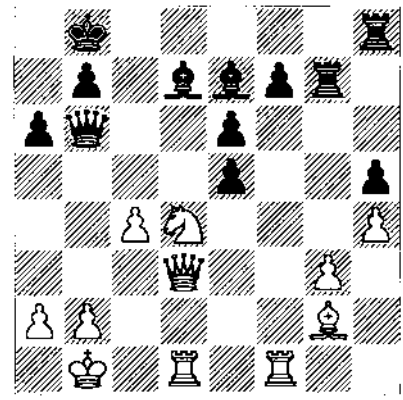
22 e5?!

This move is not so bad, but the thought behind it – that it was the beginning of a brilliant attacking scheme – was absolutely disastrous.

22...fxe5 23 fxe5 dxe5 *(D)*

23...♖hg8! 24 exd6 ♖xg3 25 ♗f3 ♗f6 looks very comfortable for Black.

W



24 ♕e3?

I had intended this move and thought it was rather clever, which rarely helps. The combined idea of ♕xe5+ and ♘c6+ is indeed unusual, but it is also quite easy for Black to deal with. In any case, if you think your play is clever *while you are playing* it almost always means that you are missing something, or at least that you are liable to miss something soon.

24 ♘f5! exf5 25 ♕xd7 ♗xh4 26 c5 ♕c7 27 ♕xf5 f6 28 gxh4 ♖xg2 29 ♕xf6 is actually about equal – but this is not consistent with the myth, which dictates that I should win in style.

24 ♕e2!? is also possible, but again Black has too many ways to muddy the waters for me to take this line seriously at the time.

24...♕c5!

A move that I didn't allow myself to see. It was a rude awakening, and forced me to snap out of the myth, but it's too late to restore the balance.

25 ♕e4 ♕c7 26 ♘b5 ♗c6 27 ♘xc7 ♗xe4+ 28 ♗xe4 ♔xc7

Black has a winning ending because his bishop is better, and it's so much easier to advance his pawns.

29 ♗xb7 a5 30 ♖f3 f5 31 ♖b3 ♖b8 32 ♗f3 ♖xb3 33 axb3 ♖xg3 34 ♗xh5 e4 35 c5 ♗xc5 36 ♗f7 e3 37 ♖e1 ♔d6 38 h5 f4 39 ♔c2 f3 40 b4 axb4 0-1

Then just four rounds later:

Jacimović – Rowson
Erevan Olympiad 1996

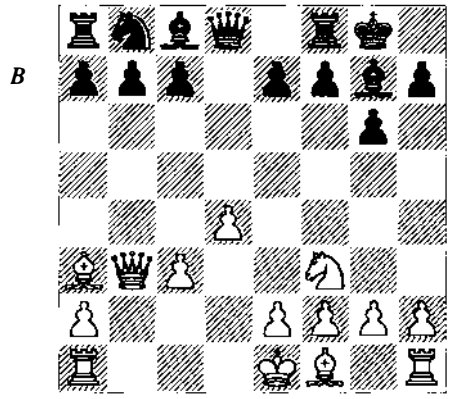
1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 cxd5 ♘xd5 5 ♕b3 ♘xc3 6 bxc3 ♗g7

6...c5!?.

7 ♗a3 0-0

7...♘d7 8 ♘f3 c5 9 e3 ♖b8!?.

8 ♘f3 *(D)*


B

A fairly quiet backwater of the Grünfeld. Now Black should play something quiet like 8...♘d7 followed by ...c5 and then maybe ...♖b8 and ...b5.

8...c5?

This is part of the Grünfeld 'blast open the centre' narrative. Here the story is that I am sacrificing a pawn to open up the position and exploit my lead in development. However, a close examination shows that I merely lose a pawn and lose my main means of undermining his centre – which means that his king is quite safe on e1 for the foreseeable future.

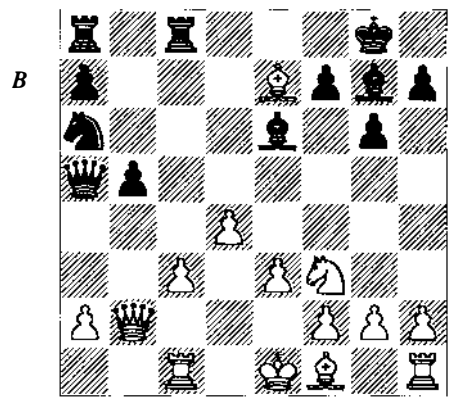
9 ♗xc5 ♘a6 10 ♗a3 ♗e6 11 ♕b2 ♕a5?

Another 'dynamic move', offering more material.

12 e3 ♖fc8 13 ♖c1 b5?

I am playing with a lot of energy, but it is mainly restless energy rather than constructive energy.

14 ♗xe7 *(D)*


B

Goodbye centre, hello winning attack! But where are you?

14...♘c7

Little slow there, Neddy...

15 ♗d3 ♘d5 16 ♕a3! ♕xa3 17 ♗xa3 a6?!

I was probably still pumped up here – comforting myself with the thought that I would

patiently take the time to reinforce my position before regrouping for a final offensive.

18 ♘g5! ♗f5 19 ♗e4! ♗xe4 20 ♘xe4 ♖c4 21 ♗c5 b4 22 ♔d2 f5 23 ♔d3! 1-0

An ignominious defeat.

These three examples might seem extreme, and indeed they are: a player of IM strength should really know better. Even so, I hope they give some idea of how myths influence our thoughts over the board. The primary effect, I think, is that when the myth imposes itself on us, we try to impose ourselves on the position. This leads to a loss of objectivity: in particular we pay too much attention to our opponent's bad moves that would allow us to actualize our myth, and far too little to their good moves that bring us back down to earth.

The Thwarted Genius

Another myth I have found myself subject to is that of 'the thwarted genius': someone who believes he understands the game much better than he plays. This idea of 'understanding' is a very dangerous one. Chess games are won not by good understanding but by good play. And yet, how often have you heard it said: "he understands chess very well"?

This may seem like an innocent remark, but it is a long way short of saying "he plays chess very well" and I believe the gap between the two widens a little every time it is uttered. Understanding is great if you are a teacher, but if you are a player, and you think of yourself as having 'good understanding', you might be subtly undermining yourself. The danger lies in the fact that our folk psychology would somehow have us believe that understanding is somehow *deeper* than playing. The corollary is the notion that chess is primarily a game of ideas where intellectuals thrive. However, as we have seen, good chess comes more from skill than knowledge, and an equally valid way to think of chess is, for instance, that it is a "test of wills" (Keres) in which the most important thing is strength of character, confidence, etc.[5]

Those who think of chess primarily in terms of understanding are often seduced by a related ideal of 'outplaying' the opponent, where the meaning of 'outplaying' is not usually made explicit but tends to mean 'demonstrating your superior understanding'. To my mind, it is no coincidence that "I was completely outplaying him!" is usually followed by a "**but...**". I have nothing against outplaying opponents, and have been known to do it myself, but it is important to be clear about what it means to 'outplay' someone, as opposed to simply beating them, which is, for most players, the ultimate aim. So my advice, based on bitter personal experience is this: **Don't try to 'outplay' your opponents; just try to beat them!**

The Noble Apprentice

I have heard you say many times that you are better than no one and no one is better than you. If you really believe that, you know you have nothing to win and nothing to lose.
BOB DYLAN

At a chess festival on the Faeroe Islands in 2000, Alex Baburin made the observation, while watching me play blitz, that I have a tendency to put my knights on h2 and h7 much more than is strictly called for[6]. At the same event, I became a bit notorious for being a vegetarian, because the Faeroese, although generally very hospitable, seemed to think that if you didn't eat meat, you must always be delighted by a green salad, and I found this hard to accept. This background makes some sense of the following conversation with Lev Psakhis and Alex Baburin which took place in the hotel lobby, a few hours after the following game was played:

Rowson – Grishchuk
Torshavn 2000

Baburin: "What happened to you today?"
Me: "I learned."
Baburin: "You know that has to stop. Every time you mess up you tell me you've learned.

This is not university now. You are not here to learn, you are here to win... You always talk about your lessons..."

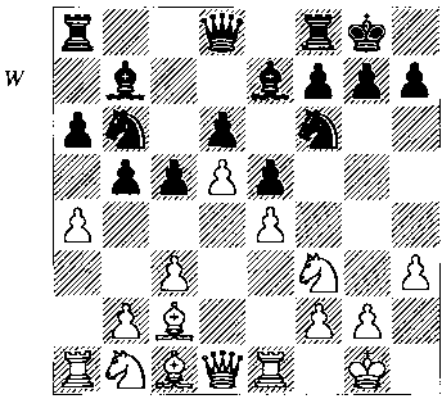
Psakhis: "You should teach your opponent a lesson..."

Me: "It's ironic, but my main mistake was to put my knight on h2."

Baburin: "Ah, you see, that's a pattern."

Psakhis: "Last joke of the day: if you ask me you placed your pieces in a very vegetarian way."

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♗b5 a6 4 ♗a4 ♘f6 5 0-0 ♗e7 6 ♖e1 b5 7 ♗b3 d6 8 c3 0-0 9 h3 ♘a5 10 ♗c2 c5 11 d4 ♗b7 12 d5 ♘c4 13 a4 ♘b6 *(D)*



14 ♘bd2?!

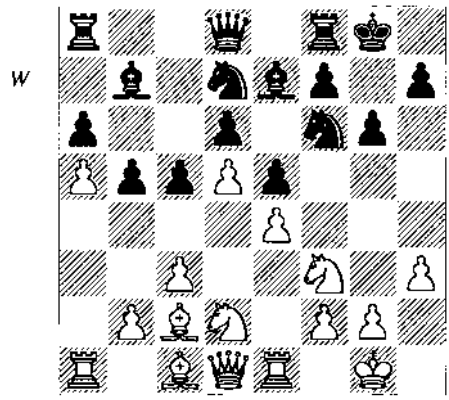
The alternative 14 ♕e2!? ♘xa4 15 ♗xa4 bxa4 16 c4 gives White some chances of gaining a small edge.

14 b3!? gives Black the possibility of playing 14...bxa4 15 bxa4 ♘c4. This is just bad here of course, but such a manoeuvre (...bxa4 followed by ...♘c4-a5) made a big impression on me when I saw it in Anand-Romanishin, Groningen Ct (2) 1994, even if it wasn't especially good in that game either! I also knew of some games where Black got lots of queenside play with ...c4 and ...b4 and this is something I was instinctively afraid of.

14...g6 15 a5

Displaying a lack of understanding/preparation. My knowledge of such lines extended to a few games by Karpov and Geller, but obviously I hadn't absorbed those games very well. I thought Black was wrong not to play ...c4 and thought I was punishing him, but actually this leaves him with a very healthy set-up. As my opponent pointed out, by closing the queenside I turn the position into a type of King's Indian, but one in which he has no problems on the queenside.

15...♘bd7 *(D)*



The position is now about equal.

16 b3

I thought I had succeeded in stabilizing the queenside and that the future was mine on the kingside. The first part of this is true, but the second part remains to be seen.

16 ♘f1 is better, but then after 16...♘h5! 17 ♗h6 ♖e8 18 ♕d2 c4 Black has a very comfortable position.

16...♘h5 17 ♘f1 ♗f6!

A good idea. My knowledge of such positions extended only to Black's plan of ...♘g7 and ...f5, which is not so good here. This way of playing is much slower, but with the queenside blocked it's hard to see a plan for White. Psakhis has played lots of games against Romanishin in this line, and he told me that this plan of ...♘h5 and ...♗f6 is a very effective antidote to White's attacking plans on the kingside.

18 ♘1h2?!

With the vague idea of ♘g4-h6 or ♘g4 and ♗g5, but none of this makes much sense. Moreover, given that Black will soon play ...f5, the knight is just badly placed on h2 – Baburin was on to something! The problem was that I

was playing without a real plan for the next few moves. I told Psakhis: "Although ♘1h2 looks funny, I had an idea." He replied to this with one of the most instructive chess one-liners I've ever heard: **"You know, one idea is not enough; good moves usually have at least two ideas."**

After 18 ♘e3 ♗g7 19 c4!? b4 the problem is that if the rooks are exchanged I will lose my a5-pawn. But on the other hand if I don't play c4 I will always have to worry about my c3-pawn when the position opens on the kingside. 20 g3!? looks like a decent move now, giving the e3-knight a square on g2 and angling towards an eventual f4. The position would then be finely balanced.

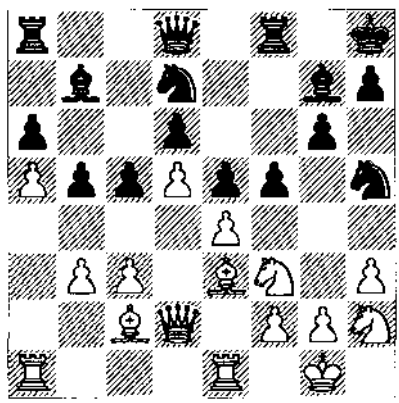
18...♔h8!

A good waiting move, preventing any ♘h6+ ideas.

19 ♗e3 ♗g7 20 ♕d2

My post-game note at this juncture: "My pieces are not on good squares. I need to get back into the habit of talking to them."

20...f5! *(D)*



I assumed this would be bad, but without good reason. Black's forces are very well coordinated, but I was still in the moralizing mindset that began when I played d5 followed by b3.

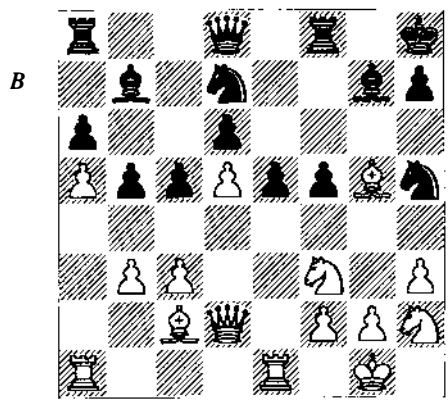
21 exf5

I may even have been aware of people watching the game here, and remember thinking that I was about to punish Black. This issue of 'what will other people think?' is an important one to address and seems to me to stem from the mythical nature of chess because we tend to take on roles as a performance for other people. Chess is much more social than it seems and at the board we make facial expressions and exhibit body language that we would never dream of if there was nobody watching. It comes down to the fact that for most of us, a chess game is a kind of performance, even when we are only performing for ourselves.

21...gxf5 22 ♗g5 *(D)*

After 22 ♘g5 f4 23 ♕d3, 23...e4! wins material due to 24 ♕xe4 ♘df6. 23...♘df6 24 ♘e6 fxe3 25 ♘xd8 exf2+ 26 ♔xf2 ♖axd8 was suggested as an alternative by Grishchuk. This was the type of line he saw which impressed me, but given that 23...e4 is so much clearer, it is not clear whether I was right to be impressed.

Grishchuk demonstrated 22 g4 f4! (22...fxg4 23 ♘g5! is dangerous for Black because now all of my pieces are making sense of themselves – I missed this at the time) 23 gxh5 fxe3 24 ♕xe3 ♖f4 25 ♕d3 ♕g8! after the game – Black is better.



22...♗f6

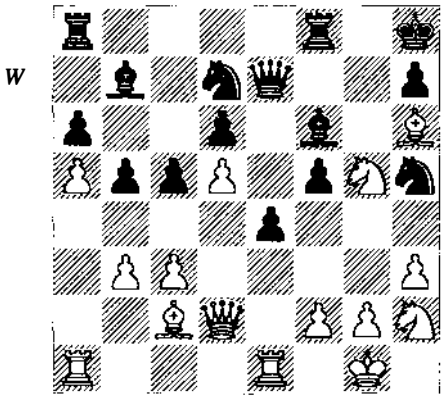
He looked disappointed to have to play this, but I mistook this for a sign that I was better. 22...♕e8 23 ♘h4 and 22...♕c7 23 ♘h4 are both better for White.

23 ♗h6 ♗g7 24 ♗g5

It's funny that I had the feeling I was being generous to make the repetition, when actually he is the only one who can reasonably deviate.

After 24 ♖ad1 ♕f6 25 ♗g5 ♕f7 Black's position is much more purposeful because White has no useful plan. However, at the time I even had thoughts of what people would think of me for chickening out like this – as I said, chess often feels like a kind of performance.

24...♗f6 25 ♗h6 e4! 26 ♘g5 ♕e7! *(D)*



This is the critical moment where my position goes from bad to lost.

I had around 14 minutes to reach move 40 and wasn't sure how much urgency I should feel here. I guess I should at least have calculated a few lines, but the painful truth is that I didn't believe in myself enough to think that I could see more deeply into the position than my opponent. I assumed he would navigate his way through the complications better than me. During the half-hour or so when he decided to spurn the repetition, he was seeing deeply into the position while I was 'surfing', going over and over the narrative that he would be taking great risks if he didn't take the draw that I was so generous to give him. However, while it is true that Grishchuk calculates much better than me (then and now) it is pathetic not even to try to compete and look for ideas.

27 ♗xf8

27 g4?! can safely be rejected on principle and indeed 27...♖g8 28 h4 ♖g6!? (or 28...b4) is winning for Black.

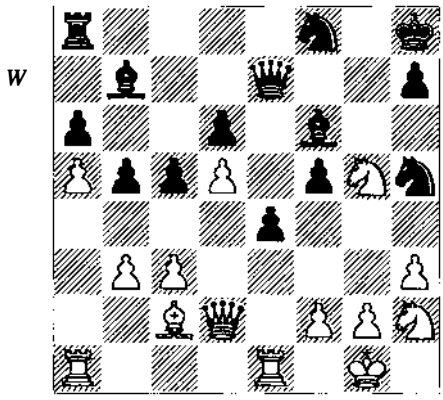
27 ♘e6!? should have been taken seriously. After 27...♖g8, 28 g4 b4 29 cxb4 ♗xa1 30 ♖xa1 ♕f6 leaves Black in control, while 28 ♘f1 b4 29 cxb4 ♗xa1 30 ♖xa1 cxb4 31 ♖d1 gives White some practical chances, but the compensation is probably not sufficient. 28 ♗d1, trying to re-route the bishop, is a bit slow because after 28...♘g7 Black keeps some pressure after the exchanges due to the bad knight on h2 and g-file pressure.

In general, ideas based on ♔h1 and g4 run into tricks based on ...♕xe6 and ...e3+.

27 ♘g4!? might be the best move. I should maybe just have trusted my judgement on this one because it was definitely the move I wanted to play at the time. I was afraid it would just lose somehow, but White comes out with a playable position, which now looks like a big achievement, but at the time I was looking for lines where I was winning. 27...fxg4 28 ♖xe4 (28 hxg4? ♗xg5 29 ♗xg5 ♘hf6 wins for Black) 28...♗xg5 29 ♗xg5 ♕g7 30 ♗h6 ♕f7 31 ♗xf8 ♖xf8 32 ♖xg4 ♘hf6 33 ♖g3 ♘xd5 34 ♖e1 gives Black an extra pawn compared to the transformation in the game, but this is a price worth paying for getting rid of his dark-squared bishop. I would say Black is slightly better here, but that this is a good outcome for White.

27...♘xf8! *(D)*

Of course this is right – I shouldn't have spent any time on 27...♖xf8 28 ♘e6, but as I mentioned, when we are not thinking clearly, we often expect bad moves from our opponents.



28 ♘xe4

I was still moralizing and thought I was better here. "How can you be better with such a bishop? [pointing to f6]" – Psakhis.

28...fxe4 29 ♗xe4?

It seems insane now, but at the time I thought I was tidying up and moving in for the kill. 29 ♖xe4 ♕g7 30 ♖g4 is better, but White is still much worse.

29...♕g7

After this move it dawned on me that I was losing an exchange, and therefore the game. I remember thinking this was Grishchuk's 'lucky day' without really believing it. In fact, I thoroughly deserved to lose for having such a head full of traffic during the whole game.

30 ♖ac1 ♗g5 31 ♕d3 ♗xc1 0-1

Going back to the conversation with Baburin and Psakhis, I think I did learn from this game with Grishchuk. I learned some useful things about the Ruy Lopez, but it was particularly instructive for me to look carefully at the disparity between the narratives of 'punishment', 'risk', etc., and the reality of what was happening on the board. My head was such a mess during the game that I am not sure how to begin to characterize it with a myth. What is clear is that after the game I was a little too ready to comfort myself with the thought "I lost, but that's OK because I learned something" and this is the *'noble apprentice'* myth that I would like to discuss.

As I argue in *7DCS* (Wanting) and the next chapter, there is a lot to be said for playing chess without attachment to results. My general impression is that we play better when we forget what we are playing for and just do it. However, such an approach is possible when you are on excellent form, or from a careful monitoring of your psychological state before the game. It does not come naturally to most players, who are, after all, seeking competitive success more than anything else.

It seems so magnanimous and innocent to assuage the pain of defeat with the empowering thought that you learned something, but I don't think it's as benign as it seems. To illustrate why it's not so benign, consider the different ways that 'the noble apprentice' might express himself after a defeat:

1) I lost, and it really hurts. I may have learned something but I don't care about that now, thanks all the same. (It's not OK to lose, not at all.)

2) I lost, and it hurts. I suppose I learned something, but it came at too high a price. (It's not OK to lose, but it's easier to come to terms with defeat when you learn something.)

3) I lost, and I wish I hadn't, but I don't feel too bad about it because I learned something. (It's not so bad to lose sometimes, and it can even be an important lesson.)

4) I lost, but that's OK because I learned something. (It's OK to lose; learning is more important than winning.)

These four reactions to defeat are by no means exhaustive or exclusive, and many players do not associate defeat and learning at all, but I always have, and I am sure I am not alone. In the case of the Grishchuk game my feeling was closest to (4) and it is really with (3) and (4) that the 'noble apprentice' myth does its work.

The 'noble apprentice' is the player who is 'noble' in the sense that he thinks himself above all the emotional turmoil caused by reactions to the result of the game. He is an 'apprentice' in that he sees his opponents, especially the stronger ones, as his masters – not so much opponents to be competed against, but instructors whose role it is to make him a better player. Please note that he won't usually be conscious that he is doing either of these things, and certainly in my game with Grishchuk, all my thoughts about punishment and risk don't suggest deference by any means. However, what I had during the game with Grishchuk was not confidence but hubris – a kind of false pride – and this is often the corollary of fear.

The noble apprentice myth is a kind of protective cushion to soften the blow to your ego caused by the prospect of defeat and the aftershock of a loss. My impression is that those who are eager to say they have learned from their defeats often have not really come to terms with the result of the game at all. Rather, they have covered it up with story that allows them to carry on without really looking deeply at what happened. In some cases, what hurts us about losing is that we screwed up somehow – that we beat ourselves in some way. However, what hurts much more, I think, is the feeling that an opponent whom you hoped you could

beat turns out to be too strong for you, especially when you sense that he will always be stronger.

Grishchuk was in sensational form during the Faeroes Chess Festival, and was already beginning to move (fast) from 2600 to 2700. During the post-mortem I was deeply impressed by the fluency and depth of his analysis, and the sense of balance in his assessment of positions. To be honest, it left me feeling a little deflated. It was abundantly clear to me that he was a different class of player. I could perhaps compete with him in a single game, but not in the long haul. There aren't many players I feel that way about, but Morozevich made the same impression, and to a lesser extent, Kasimdzhanov, Aronian and Sutovsky.

There are some players who just seem to function a few orders of magnitude higher – as if they are qualitatively stronger, speaking a different language. Then there are others who are certainly stronger, but seem to be merely contingently stronger, perhaps because they play better openings, have more determination, are more focused on chess, etc. With these players you feel you are talking the same language, and you can accept that they know a few more words – words you might learn at a later stage if you get round to it. In my experience, what the ego finds hard to deal with is when a player you thought was merely contingently stronger turns out to be qualitatively stronger, and this was the case with the above game. It is then that the 'noble apprentice' comes to your aid, and comforts you with the mildly perfidious thought that you are growing in strength, because after this defeat you are stronger than you were before it. Just when you begin to suspect that the gap is too wide to bridge, you tell yourself that you are laying the foundations, but deep down you know that there is no way across the water.

Please be clear that I am not saying we should not try to learn from our defeats – not at all. Nor am I saying that there are any insuperable barriers to improvement. In this case, I don't think it's absolutely impossible that I could become as strong as Grishchuk, I just think it is extremely unlikely. What I am really saying is that we ought to be more careful with the idea that we should learn from our defeats, especially when we are up against stronger players, because it might weaken our resolve: "If only I had understood this, or known that, it would have been different." Don't kid yourself like that. As I've already said, it's not about what you know, but how well you play, and that is mainly a question of how hard you try on the day. Don't leave space for regret to creep in later. Even when you are up against a player of a different class, fight with every ounce of your being and live with the consequences.

Conclusions:

1) Chess allows people to experience drama, excitement, and the fruits of imagination.

2) Many players are motivated by a myth that they may not be fully aware of and this is often a source of mistakes.

3) Chess myths take many forms and are often the basis for our preferred styles of play.

4) Be careful with the idea of learning from your defeats. If we become comfortable with the idea of learning, it can undermine our will to compete.

5 Concentrate! Concentrate? Concentrate.

Chess is simply a medium through which concentration and a higher state of mind is achieved ... it is like contemplating your navel, only better.
JON SPEELMAN

Blaise Pascal wrote that all of man's miseries stem from not being able to sit quietly in a room alone. The heart of this provocative observation, I believe, is that our miseries can only be overcome when we face up to our true natures. We avoid sitting quietly alone because without distractions we are confronted with the reality of our own minds, and that reality is not pleasant and orderly, but random and chaotic. When we surrender ourselves to our thoughts we find that we have monkey minds jumping all over the place. Yet, although out of focus, our minds are not out of control. We can shield ourselves from the chaos by watching television, checking our e-mail or putting the kettle on. We look outwards to keep the chaos inside at bay. So as chess-players, it's not so much that we concentrate in order to play chess, but that we play chess in order to concentrate. We love the experience of concentration, and that is what chess offers us: a way of focusing our thoughts so that 'a higher state of mind is achieved'. Concentration may be demanding at times, but it is also something we crave in order to stay happy and sane.

That said, concentration comes in degrees, and while watching television may require very little concentration, trying to assess a prospective king and pawn ending will usually require much more. 'Flow' might be described as the subjective experience of optimal concentration, and some even consider the experience of flow to be an essential ingredient in a happy life. In *7DCS* I introduced the concept of flow as an antidote to *Wanting* in chess, and now I believe that the experience of 'flow' plays a wider role in our appreciation of chess.

The concept of flow, and associated ideas, come from Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (pronounced 'chick-sent-me-high') – a Hungarian-born social psychologist. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the common characteristics of optimal experience (flow) are: "a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous." (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

That sounds a lot like chess to me! Csikszentmihalyi adds that one of the conditions that can facilitate flow is competition. I don't consider myself particularly competitive by nature, so I was fascinated to discover that the roots of the word "compete" are the Latin *con petire*, which meant "to seek together". What we are seeking together is to actualize our potential as individuals, and this task is made easier when others force us to do our best. Again, chess gives us that opportunity.

Therefore I am suggesting that a huge part of our motivation for playing chess is the experience of flow. What makes chess particularly good for generating flow is that everyone can find challenges to suit their skill level. Csikszentmihalyi points out that flow comes about

when skill level and challenge are well matched, which means that you are more likely to experience flow from a close game than a complete mismatch. When it is too easy we feel bored, and when it's too hard we feel anxious or defeatist. This resonates with my own experience of playing chess, and I know that my most memorable chess experiences have been those in which I was most fully concentrated.

Learning to Concentrate

*Concentration is not staring hard at something, it is not **trying** to concentrate.*
TIMOTHY GALLWEY

So far we have been considering the fact that chess provides the conditions for concentration and flow, but I want to emphasize that concentration is not like a switch that goes on or off, but more like a dimmer switch that goes up and down. The key question for chess-players is: how can you optimize concentration throughout the game to maximize your competitive success?

I recently ended an interactive lesson online by giving my student the following advice (edited for ease of reading):

Me: The key for you is, I now believe, the key for almost everyone, and it's not what I thought it was when we started working together. It's called concentration! Having taught for a while with a variety of students and examined my own games closely, it seems that so much of the extraneous stuff that causes us problems – the storytelling, the myth-making, the egoism – all that stuff that prevents us from solving the real positional/tactical problems properly, arises because we are not concentrating properly. **But**, here's the main point: telling people they need to concentrate is just stupid. It's like telling people to exercise more – they know it already but they don't know how to do it.

I have come to see that concentration is not a single thing, like a switch you turn on and off, and that concentration in chess requires different kinds of skills from concentration elsewhere. It seems to me now that the most reliable way to improve your practical results is to improve concentration at the board, and the way to do this sounds quite simple: practice concentrating away from the board.

Easier said than done, I know, but now I think that the **kind** of chess work you do plays a key role. If it is just taking in new information; playing through games, learning theory, even looking at endgames – all of this is just 'stuff' that gives you exposure to some new patterns, but very rarely does it help you to solve problems at the board.

With me so far?

Student: Yes.

Me: OK, so the next insight is about concentration itself. It came from reflecting on the quotation [above] "Concentration is not staring hard at something, it is not **trying** to concentrate". This was a real eye-opener for me. If you are trying to concentrate there is already a problem, because we concentrate best when there is no strain.

Student: Like **trying** to swing a tennis racket.

Me: Yes! A bit like that probably, or perhaps **trying** to swing a golf club. Anyway, here's the rub: the best way to condition yourself to have concentration at the board – to be in a state where you are ready to solve problems – and enjoy doing it in a fairly relaxed way, even if you are determined, is to cultivate that same state through practice away from the board. That does not mean solving basic tactics. The types of problem you need are much more complex, nuanced, multi-faceted – like the ♔h1 example we looked at last time [see Rowson-Christensen in Chapter 7]. You won't find many positions like that in books because they are not too glamorous, and you have to be quite strong already to appreciate the difference in quality between one good move and another, in a way that you don't to appreciate the difference between delivering checkmate as opposed to winning a pawn. So here's what I think you need to try to do:

First, if you don't already have one, buy a chess clock.

Next, set up a database and call it 'interesting games/positions' or whatever you like. And then the aim is to select games and positions that intrigue you – the more of your own games the better, but for this to work, at least some of the sources have to have answers, because you should have something to compare your work with.

Student: I do have some interesting games and positions myself. I can pull some hard problems from Nunn's puzzle books ... or from his well-annotated games collections...

Me: They might be too hard for what I have in mind – some will be good – but give yourself some gentler ones too. In any case, the key is not the whole game but selecting one or two positions, setting the clock to a suitable amount of time – 20 minutes normally works for me, but whatever you decide, stick with it (be strict) and then just think and try to decide what to do. At first it will be odd, and your answers will not look like the game or the analysis at all. You might get discouraged by this, but then the key is to compare your ideas with those presented, and quite quickly you will probably see a flaw in your appraisal of the position, which should hopefully motivate you to look deeper next time.

The only thing is that most sources have concrete definite answers. These are still useful for improving concentration, but ideal sources for this kind of work are positions where the solution is not completely concrete, as is the case with real games[7]. **However, the main thing is to get into the habit of sitting down, selecting a problem, setting it up, setting the clock, thinking, stopping, comparing your analysis with the source analysis ... and keep doing this. It will be hard, and you will not really be 'learning' anything through this. But, as I've said before, chess is about skill – what you need is not 'know-that' but 'know-how'.**

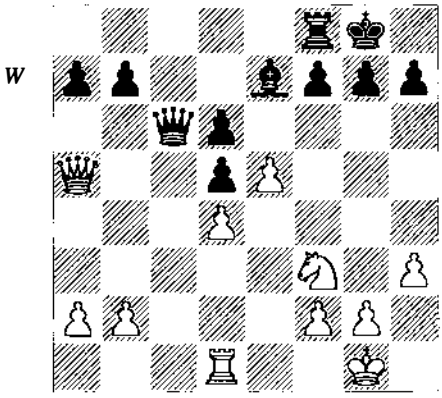
Student: "Does it matter if I keep my notes by hand, rather than ChessBase?"

Me: No – whatever works for you, but what does matter is being quite strict with yourself. One exercise completed with full application for 20 minutes is easily worth an hour of playing through games.

I stand by the advice I gave at the end of that lesson, and now I believe that **the main function of chess trainers should be to guide the training of their students, rather than to teach them directly. The best thing you can do for a student is to select interesting positions for them, and analyse them carefully so you can see the kinds of things that the student is missing.** The trouble with this approach is prosaic, but real. Chess tutors are normally paid by the hour, and this tends to make you think that you should be showing the student certain things, imparting knowledge, giving hints and tips, etc. This is understandable, but much more useful, I think, is to give the student difficult positions to solve, to be there in a supportive role as they solve them, and then carefully consider what the student missed and why.

I say this based on my experience as a chess tutor, but also in my experience of being 'taught' by Artur Yusupov. This consisted almost entirely of attempting to solve exercises that he knew well. The training exercises had definite answers, but they also resembled real positions so if I deviated from the answers, Yusupov would put down his book of answers and I had to deal with the man himself! This took place over the course of five days at Artur's house in Germany. I enjoyed the hospitality of the Yusupov family, but my ego has never had such a systematic pounding before or since. I imagine we looked at about 30 different difficult positions, and in most cases I got the first few moves right only to slip up towards the end. Almost never did I get the solution right from start to finish. It made me feel like a very weak player. Yusupov is generous in spirit, and didn't want me to suffer, but he pointed out, and I think rightly, that I did not calculate like a grandmaster. On the one hand this was discouraging, but it was good to know what I needed to work on, and given that I was almost 2550 at the time I consoled myself with the thought that I must be very good at other aspects of the game. Perhaps, I thought, if I could sort this part (admittedly a fairly major part!) of my game out, then I could still make significant strides.

The following game took place about three weeks after my work with Yusupov in Germany.



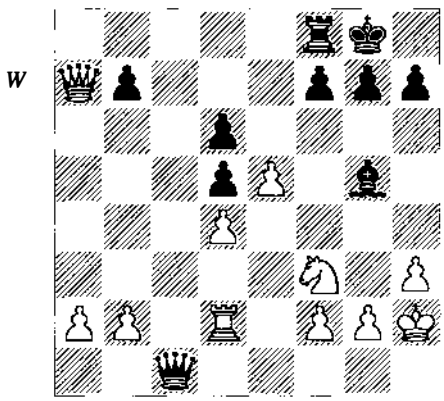
Rowson – Yermolinsky
World Open, Philadelphia 2002

Here I had to decide whether it was safe to capture the pawn on a7. The experience of dissatisfaction I felt while working with Yusupov, especially in situations where I stopped my calculations one move prematurely, was fresh in my mind. So here I started looking move to move until I saw an exquisite detail at the end of the main line:

19 ♕xa7 ♕c2?!

19...♖c8 leaves Black a long way short of sufficient compensation, but this was still better than the game continuation.

20 ♖d2 ♕c1+ 21 ♔h2 ♗g5 *(D)*



I had seen this move in advance, but the training with Yusupov gave me the composure not to be panicked by it, and to keep looking and see what might be hidden in the position.

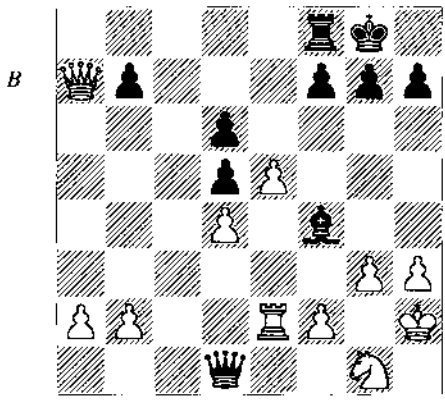
22 ♖e2 ♗f4+

After 22...♕f1 23 ♖c2 ♕d1 24 ♖c3 White keeps control.

23 g3 ♕d1

When first considering 19 ♕xa7 this had looked highly troublesome, but my training experience gave me the resilience to look one move further:

24 ♘g1! *(D)*



It looks so simple now, but it was not at all easy to see this essential resource five moves previously. My opponent resigned, because he is losing too much material, and I felt deeply satisfied. It wasn't a great game, but I had that precious feeling of self-overcoming, of knowing that I had grown as a player. I believe I won, not because I was a stronger player. but because I was better concentrated than my opponent that day. And I was concentrated because of my recent training. Yermolinsky stopped his analysis in a position that looks highly promising for Black, but I gave my full effort to see one move deeper, and that made all the difference.

1-0

It is hard to explain how solving problems like this one (set it up before 19 ♕xa7 – what happens if White takes on a7?) improves concentration, but it seems to be a matter of conditioning. If you study chess by playing through games or reading instructional manuals, there is a danger that you come to think of chess too conceptually. On the other hand, if you systematically solve problems like this

one, you are more likely to think in terms of perpetual problem-solving when you get to the board, which, in my view, is a much better approach to take. A further benefit is that solving problems like this one as a means of training is very sobering. It gets you away from all the storytelling stuff and makes you more focused on working things out over the board. It also makes you more attuned to your opponent's possibilities, because in the process of training you realize that to be accurate you must constantly anticipate your opponent's ideas.

The Lazy Detective

I currently view myself as a 'lazy detective'. I want to solve the case based on some loose and shallow theories. I don't want to get my hands dirty with tedious details. "He's got blood on his shoes, must have been him ... and it was him last time ... stands to reason it will be him again ... no need to question him...
GORDON RATTRAY, Scottish club player, rated around 2100

I often have the impression that most players, myself included, rarely 'think things through' as much as they should. We usually prefer to jump to conclusions, or if we don't have enough energy to jump, we take the elevator. Worse still, before the doors of the elevator close, we decide which conclusion we are going to arrive at.

I made it clear while illustrating the sin of *Thinking* in *7DCS* that commanding someone to 'Think!' is a rather ambiguous demand. There are so many ways to think, and some have more ways to structure their thoughts than others. Moreover, telling someone to try harder to solve problems at the board is sometimes even a bit cruel, because many players would dearly love to think productively but just don't know how to get any traction going. However, it is still my impression that most of us don't try as hard at the board as we might do. We don't usually push ourselves to see all there is to see, and prefer to cut our analysis short and make 'informed guesses' based on a superficial appraisal of the position. In this sense we are all capable of being 'lazy detectives'.

A few months ago I was approached to help develop a website about chess improvement. I was hesitant, and honestly told the site's main financial backer that I had thought about that matter considerably, and felt that it was extremely difficult, particularly for adults, to improve their chess. The conversation became quite animated, and was fuelled by a few glasses of red wine, but I enjoyed the experience so much that when I went home I noted down some of the more memorable lines.

I began by trying to argue that chess is a deeply psychological game, and that most adult players had deep-seated fears, desires, prejudices and habits, and that whenever they tried to learn something new, all of these traits covered the cloudy lens through which they tried to take in the new information. My protagonist seemed to agree, but wasn't deterred. He kept on making the point that adult players, with the right guidance, could improve considerably. He seemed to be a bit frustrated by the fact that that I wasn't so sure. I kept on emphasizing that there were psychological restraints that had to be worked through first, before an adult's chess mind was in a ripe state to assimilate new material that would benefit him. He wasn't having any of it, and went on:

"There may be psychological issues, but they were fashioned in a furnace that has long since gone cold! ... Psychology in teaching can't do much if they (the psychological issues) are so hard-wired..."

In an attempt to illustrate this, he continued:

"In my case, I know I have heaps of psychological baggage that I bring to the game. That's mainly because some drunken Irishman told me to read Nimzowitsch. Bill Fitzgerald was his name, a very bright drunken Irishman ... and I followed his advice ... but I became like an intellectual educated beyond my intelligence – I knew everything and understood nothing..."

Then I said that whatever the level of play, or the psychological issues involved, there was a separate question of how hard you try at the board. On the basis of what I knew of his games, and his reaction to my suggestions, I put

it to him that he wasn't trying hard enough to solve problems and work things out at the board. His response was striking:

"But the difference is that you *can* put effort in at the board, you are not just ploughing through the undergrowth like some lumbering elephant..."

I smiled, but my wine went down with a gulp.

"You tell me to try harder at the board – but how? It's not laziness but lack of ideas – I have the hammer, but I don't have any ******* nails..."

Excuse his French, but it's important to capture the frustration. He said all this with such heated conviction that I didn't really know how to respond. I didn't need to...

"I get possessed by an idea ... completely possessed ... I see one thing that makes some sense, that means something, and then I can hardly think of anything else – it all goes towards that one idea. And I think the reason I do that is because of reading too much of Nimzowitsch when I started playing... That drunken Irishman told me: 'Read Nimzowitsch, you'll win all yer games – he's yer man I tell ya. He's this chess-player who used to stand on his head. If you take in all his concepts you'll be brilliant because most chess-players don't know what on earth they're doing...', and he said that as he took his tenth pint of Guinness... So I took in all the concepts – I knew everything, but I really understood nothing ... I felt like Capablanca without any of the talent..."

We started to speak about *My System* and moved on to the more general problem that books can often give false confidence and make you feel that you understand more than you really do. He seemed to agree:

"I also have a tendency to look for solutions ... it's part of being a bibliophile ... In fact I'm sure my books are bad for my chess; what I should do is burn my house down and I'd probably improve my chess 100%."

I hope the editor lets that one pass, and assuming he does I should say that books aren't the main problem – the problem is the relationship we take to them. Chess books tend to be marketed along the lines of: 'You are a chess-player. As a chess-player you need to know certain things. This book will give you what you need to know. Once you know it, you will have an advantage over your competitors. They don't know it, so your results will improve. If they have bought the same book, and do know it, then you might be interested to look at some of our other books...'

The trouble with this approach is the same trouble I noted in Chapter 1 – we construct the knowledge we take from books, and in the process we adulterate it. In any case, the above conversation made me reflect on the manifold reasons we may have for being 'lazy detectives'. In some cases it is simply lack of effort, but sometimes the 'laziness' is more subtle, as we see in what follows.

You are about to read an edited transcript of an online lesson on the *Internet Chess Club* with the same person. He is rated around 1700 and shows an earnest desire to improve. At the time, I found it surprising that even with a lot of prompting he found it difficult to solve the problem I set. However, later I noticed that even strong GMs had difficulty with it, which really intrigued me, because solving the given problem is really a matter of deductive reasoning, which many assume to be one of the main modes of chess thinking.

Student: Hi

Me: Hi! So I had a look at your games

Student: OK

Me: First thought: two demons you have to try to slay

Student: only two?

Me: crass blunders and time-trouble

Student: yup

Me: slaying the second will help with the first

Student: yep

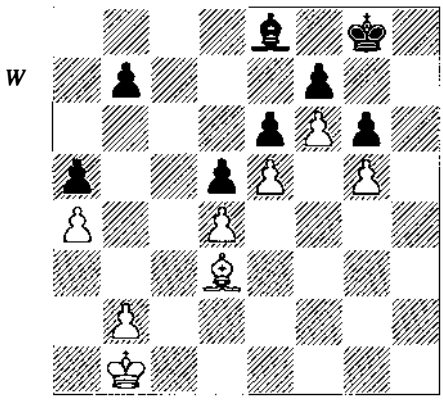
Me: I think you may also have what you might call, wait for it, 'a Genius Complex' – which is a bit strong – it simply means that you really want to play good chess – and there are moments when you do, positionally speaking, but that's also a bit dangerous ... because your opponent is always there to knock you off your perch and it's easy to forget that...

Student: It's like an intellectual: being educated beyond your intelligence?

Me: Yes, somewhat similar. It comes about by studying lots of GM games and trying to emulate. Another analogy would be trying to speak a language and knowing some very sophisticated phrases but not really having a firm grasp of the language more generally...

Student: Without knowing "Where's the toilet?"

Me: Yes! That sort of thing ... OK – let me give you a fairly difficult puzzle – it might help tease out some of your thinking processes.



Estrin – Ivashin
Correspondence 1947
White to play and win.

Me: White to play and win. I'll be back in five minutes. It's not easy, so don't expect to solve it in that time.

(Five minutes later) OK, any ideas?

Student: Still struggling ... but I see that White is clearly better ... must sac at some stage in order to get his king active ... I was looking at an immediate b4 ... or

Me: OK – not bad.

Student: Or ♗b5 first ... but

Me: You are right that the king must be activated...

Student: I can't work out how the king gets into business...

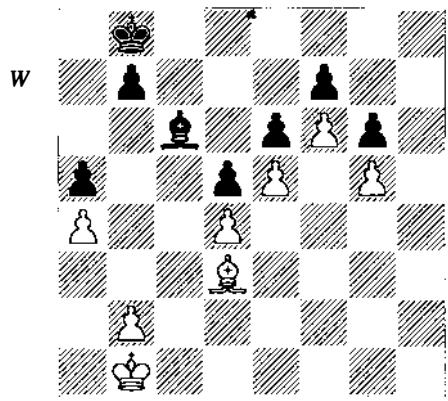
Me: ... but it's too early to assume a sac must be necessary ... in any case getting the king in is the heart of the puzzle ... OK, I am guessing you looked at b4 more or less immediately and ♗b5 immediately

Student: Yeah I know that ... yes – I also glanced at ♗xg6 at some point.

Me: Good, ♗xg6 is part of the equation. Any idea, more precisely, when it might be relevant?

Student: When I've managed to activate my king on the queenside?

(At this point I edited the position and put the black king from g8 to b8 and the bishop from e8 to c6 (D))



Me: White to play and win

(He played ♗xg6!) Good

(I return to the initial position)

OK, so the point of ♗xg6 is that the black king can't ever come past ... which square?

Student: Er d8

Me: Yes – or d7. OK, that's where ♗xg6 comes in ... but that's miles away! First of all, we need to do something

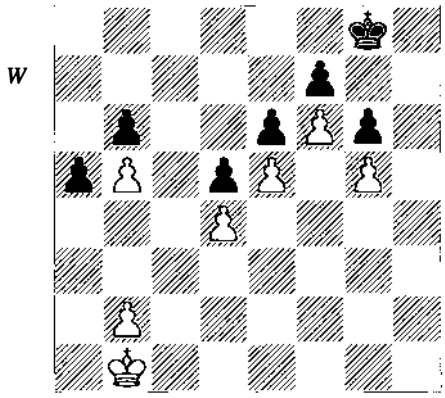
Student: my thoughts exactly

Now he moved the pieces about on the board a bit – trying ♔a2, then taking it back and trying ♗b5, which he met with ...♔f8, then he tried b4, Black replied ...b6, before taking it back and playing b3 on the first move, put it back and then tried 1 ♗b5 and rested. I took on b5, he took back, and I played ...b6 (D) and said:

Me: Keep moving. Whenever you play b4, let me know and I'll take it, or if I'm feeling cheeky I'll play ...a4. It's a fortress in either case.

Student: OK!!!

Me: So, no joy there, but you are getting somewhere, although at this stage the king isn't getting through...



Student: That's what I saw

Me: Good, so eliminate *the move* 1 ♗b5 – but here's the thing: don't eliminate *the idea.* The move and the idea are not the same thing. It doesn't work now because Black can take. But can you imagine a scenario when Black might not be able to take?

Student: when the white king is covering a4?

Me: Not exactly, but keep thinking...

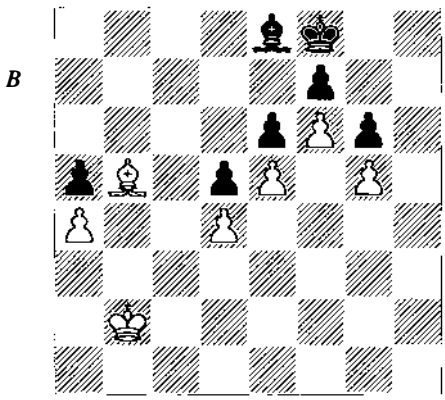
(Now, from the initial position I removed the b-pawns from the board)

Now what happens?

He played ♗b5, I replied ...♔f8, he played ♔b2 (D) and I said:

Me: And ... ?

Student: He's in zuggie?



Me: indeed ... but!

(And now I played ...♔g8, allowing him to take the bishop on e8, before moving back to f8. This leaves White a clear bishop up but...)

Tell me a winning plan

Student: There ain't!

Me: Not so fast! You have to sac the bishop for one of the pawns, but which one gives your king a chance?

He found this part easy, and saw the winning idea of bringing the king to f4, taking on d5 (from c6, so that the king can't get out) and playing e6 followed by ♔e5, very quickly.

Me: Good, so that is winning

(I go back to the initial position but with the b-pawns removed)

Which means he is in Zuggie here (after ♗b5). So what does that suggest?

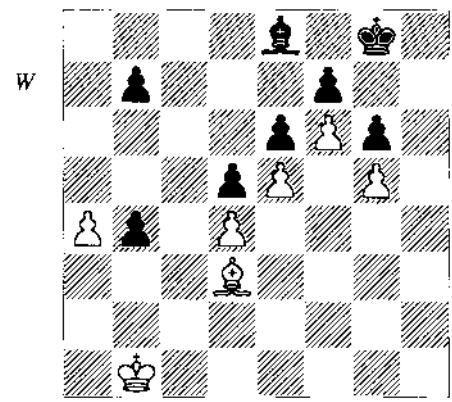
(I return the b-pawns and go back to the initial position)

Student: OK, try to exchange the b-pawns?

Me: Yes. *(I play 1 b4)* Now we know that 1...b6 is not working – right?

(This wasn't as clear to him as I had hoped it would be now, but then he realized that White would take on a5 and play ♗b5, so then we returned to the initial position.)

1...axb4 *(D)*



Me: OK, now it gets difficult.

(Now he played 2 ♗b5?)

Me: No!!

He took the move back, but this was discouraging because after taking on b5 and playing ...b6 we are back at the same drawn king and pawn ending. However, I suppose the first impression is that by taking on b4 White somehow has more chance of getting the king in, and it was only his first thought.

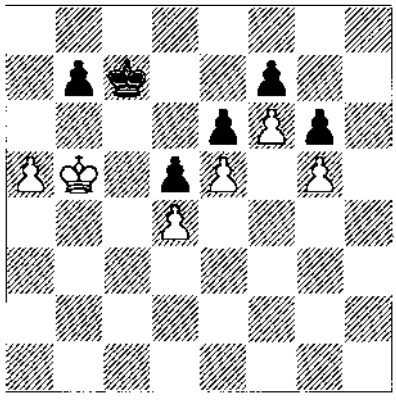
So then he tried 2 a5!?.

Me: Good, or at least better. This is the right kind of idea. We don't have to go into details now, but it turns out that 2 ♗c2 wins while this only draws. I will show you why, but the main thing was the first position and to see how you approached it.

(Here I should add that this is a difficult detail, even for GMs, most of whom think of 2 a5 first because it seems positionally correct.)

Now I show the drawing line leading to a king and pawn ending: 2 a5 ♗a4! 3 ♔b2 (3 ♗c2?! ♗b5 and ...♗c4) 3...♔f8 4 ♗c2 ♗xc2 5 ♔xc2 ♔e8 6 ♔b3 ♔d7 7 ♔xb4 ♔c6 8 ♔a4 ♔d7 9 ♔b5 ♔c7 *(D).*

W



Me: This position looks promising for White (even to GMs) but it turns out that it's drawn. The position (after the exchange of a- and b-pawns) with ♔d6 vs ♔d8 is a reciprocal zugzwang but White can't force that position and give Black the move. In order to win, White needs to keep the bishops in order to have ♗xg6 available.

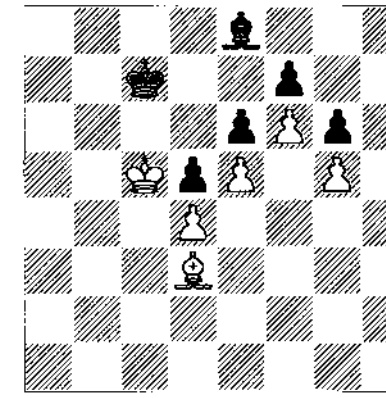
(I go back to the position after 1...axb4 and play...)

2 ♗c2!

Me: this is winning now because the black bishop quickly runs out of squares.

[I took this example from Glenn Flear's book *Mastering the Endgame* and here is the analysis: "**2...♗c6 3 ♔b2 b6 4 ♔b3 ♔f8 5 ♔xb4 ♔e8 6 a5** and Black resigned in view of 6...bxa5+ 7 ♔xa5 ♔d8 8 ♔b6 ♗e8 9 ♔c5 ♔c7 10 ♗d3 *(D).*"

B



"Black is in zugzwang; e.g., 10...♗c6 11 ♗xg6! or 10...♔d8 11 ♔d6." Glenn doesn't mention 10...♔d7 but then White has 11 ♗b5+ ♔d8 12 ♗xe8 ♔xe8 13 ♔c6! and the king and pawn ending is now winning.]

Me: But the point is not so much the intricacies of the ending but how you approached the problem. Now, I have shown this to a few of my students and most of them struggle with it a lot, in fact all of them do. So why am I showing it to you? Any idea?

Student: to show my shortcomings

Me: Almost...

Student: technique?

Me: No. You were sort of right about shortcomings. You see this position is about problem-solving, as most chess is. You have to be really persistent if you want to get somewhere. I imagine that most club players on getting this position would look around, and then play ♗b5 on the off-chance that the opponent would take it and then not take back on b4 a few moves later, or they would begin with 1 b3 and hope that when they later played b4, their opponent would take it. The solution here requires some vision – but it's not beyond you (or anyone else) because there are not so many pieces. The problem is the monkey mind that won't sit still, and jumps from one thing to another.

If you know it is winning (I told you as much) and you know that the white king has to get involved, you can already eliminate a lot. So what sort of question should you ask yourself? How can I get the king in?

Student: I take the point, but that's what I kept asking!!!! I also saw b4 but didn't understand the idea about the b-pawns being off for me to win

Me: Yes, that's the difficult bit, but it's not so difficult step by step. So the real question is: how can I get the king in, and what's stopping it at the moment?

Student: a5 and d5

Me: yes, good. What can you do about d5?

Student: nothing

Me: good, a5?

Student: b4

Me: OK, but in most cases he'll play ...b6, and keep the pawn there. Is there anything else we might conceivably do to get at the a5-pawn?

Student: And that's when I've got to understand the bit about the pawns being off and exchanging bishops

Me: Not really, you see that's too grand a conception. You cannot understand that *a priori* – you just look at the position and see what he is likely to do...

Student: *a priori* ... do you go to that restaurant too?

Me: :-) It seems that there are two main ideas in the position: b4 and ♗b5, and you need to get them in the right order before the hidden idea – *zugzwang* – reveals itself. Once you see the zugzwang, you are halfway there, but you cannot get there immediately.

Student: So I think like a baby one little step at a time

Me: Yes – in this sort of position, not all of them. The reason I chose this one is that it should speak to the issue of focusing on one idea ... because to get it right you have to see more than one idea (which you did) – and then organize them.

Student: And I'll get there ... surely it helps to have some appreciation of the position?

Me: Well, to be honest, I think you have that. You can see that White has more space, the better bishop, etc. And you can see that you need to get the king in ... thus far you are up there with the best. You also notice that ♗xg6 is an issue.

Student: But it's how to do it!

Me: Well that's what we are on about here. What stops you, I think, is a combination of not really believing you'll get it and not really caring. Is that too harsh – or is it somewhere close to the truth?

Student: I think I care ... I don't have a belief ... I just can't find it ... I think this is one of the reasons for my time-trouble.

Me: Well – OK it's probably a bit harsh, but I think these things – desire and belief – are there, even when they are not at the forefront of your thoughts

Student: I think I can be lazy

Me: So you see now, there are two ideas: b4 and ♗b5 – and another, ♗xg6 – but maybe the key thing is the fourth idea, zugzwang – that's probably what you didn't get

Student: I saw the zuggie too ... but I didn't see the b-pawns point.

Me: Well the b-pawns point and the zuggie are effectively the same. In any case, laziness is a form of not caring; you want the result but not the process... OK, so you saw that after 1 ♗b5 he had to take, sort of.

Student: I saw that ... but then what? I struggled with that.

Me: OK – but this "then what?" should all be focused around the king. If he takes after ♗b5, you win – **if** and only if when you play b4 he lets you take on a5. But he won't, so what can I do? Well you can play b4 first – but what's the point? He just goes ...b6 – nothing changes? But it does...

Student: I think I don't see chess as problem-solving ... and I've got to start doing that...

Me: Yes! Because the idea that it is 'about ideas' is only partially true.

Student: I see it as a battle with rules and opportunities.

Me: Well it is many things, but for me, at its most abstract, chess is about using ideas to solve problems.

Student: I've got to be better at implementation.

Me: Yes, absolutely! That is the crux of the issue. So here, you have the ideas – all of them – and that is usually what separates stronger players from weaker ones. Stronger ones know which ideas are relevant, but here the problem was different: you had the ideas but you didn't use them to solve the problem... it's

a question of what is driving your thoughts forward ... that's what I mean by caring ... here the driving thought should be getting your king in – and everything is built around that ... rather than wanting to get your king in ... stopping ... looking for ideas ... other ideas ♗xg6, ♗b5, b4 ... and then losing track of what you are trying to do.

Student: Exactly ... I recognized that ... my big thought was how do I get the king going ... but I couldn't work it out...

Me: But I feel that your big thought was not connected up to the ideas. They were disconnected because your big thought was not a real question but a desire – it was in a different dimension of thought from the ideas. If you start with the big thought, you should come to the a5-pawn.

Student: All my thinking stopped with that pawn on a5, ... I couldn't figure how to dislodge it

Me: Right: that's a block, and the key is that you can't actually dislodge it if that's the only idea, if that's your only weapon – and that means that either you are missing something, or there is something wrong with the problem ... To dislodge it you need two other ideas: ♗b5 and zugzwang.

Student: It was the only one I had ... I was sort of fixated on it

Me: yes! And that's the whole point of showing this position because it shows the limitations of having one idea. To make progress with thinking you may only think of one idea at a time, but you have to juggle with the other ideas too – know that they are there. Look at it this way: ideas are social creatures – they like to get out and mingle with other ideas...

Student: I saw ♗b5 as important in the zuggie situation, but you're right I didn't link it with b4.

Me: OK, so to play chess well that's what you need to do. To see lots of ideas is not enough. You have to find out how they relate to each other.

Student: So how do I do that?

Me: slowly

Student: lol! ... that's my problem ... thus time-trouble

Me: But I don't mean slowly during the game, but the process of learning to do this is slow. One thing at a time ... more positions like this should help. At the moment you are looking for ideas but you are not using these ideas to solve problems. So in future, start the position by asking "what seems to be the problem?" Sometimes you'll get it wrong, but at least there will be some order to your thoughts.

Student: OK, I like that.

I enjoyed that lesson, partly because I had to concentrate hard to follow my student's line of reasoning and to imagine where it was going wrong. I suspect we only scratched the surface in this case, but I hope the conversation reveals that that the 'laziness' of the lazy detective is sometimes more than just a lack of effort. In this case, it was not an unwillingness to think but an inability to get the thinking going, because it proved too difficult to find how all the ideas related to each other. The student understood each idea on its own terms, but couldn't hold them all in mind and see how they linked up. I believe this is a problem of 'cognitive load' and one of the reasons chess is so hard. We return to this issue in Chapter 6.

Can You Make any Useful Moves before Your First Move?

The will to win is not as important as the will to prepare to win
BOBBY KNIGHT (US basketball coach)

Getting yourself into the right frame of mind before the game is crucial to optimizing your results. Many players come to the board feeling a bit edgy, a bit distracted, or a bit lethargic, if not all of these things. They play a few moves in this state and then later blame their loss on a blunder or, worse still, on time-trouble, when in fact the problems began before the very first move.

Before I present my suggestions on what to do about this, I concede that some days *are*

better than others, and there is a limit to how much we can mould ourselves into the right shape before we play. If you come to the board after a bad argument or a bad meal, or a particularly bad haircut, you will probably find it harder to play well.

When I played a lot of weekend tournaments I used to see scores of adults streaming into the hall on a Friday night in their work clothes, grabbing a sandwich and a polystyrene coffee *en route* to sitting down at the board, where they sat and tried to block out all the debris of the day that was still swimming around in their heads. Ideally, most of them would have preferred to go home, have a shower, change clothes, look at a little chess, have a hot meal and then take a leisurely walk to the venue. However, as we know, life is not always this accommodating, and many players have no choice but to come to the board without having time to tune in to the fact that they are about to play chess. This sort of state of mind might be called (somewhat ridiculously) **'sub-optimal internal conditions'.**

The phenomenon of starting the game with 'sub-optimal internal conditions' is widespread and I'm sure it occurs at all levels of chess. I have seen grandmasters come to the board rigid with determination to win, seemingly not aware that it is possible to try too hard. Sometimes they seem to be grinding their teeth and using their hands to wrestle with their heads. In such a state you are not psychologically ready to deal with difficult decisions and the conditions are ripe for problems relating to *egoism.*

Most of us are aware that our state of mind at the board matters and we try to be confident, concentrated, relaxed, determined, etc. However, just as our state of mind at the board influences our decisions at the board, what we do before the game influences our state of mind at the board.

I recently had a conversation with a strong grandmaster who was in the middle of a disastrous tournament. The next day he was going to play a world-class opponent and said, with a resigned tone of voice, that he would 'do his best'. I put it to him that if you are fed-up, lacking in confidence, and not really enjoying yourself it is absurd to think that you can come to the board and 'do your best'. I added that the best way for him to optimize his chances for the forthcoming game was to improve his current state of mind.

One way to look at this is to think of overall performance as a result of two main factors: 1) General form, and 2) Presence of mind at the board. Now I positively dislike formal models of such things, so this distinction and the numbers that follow are just crude approximations to make a point. There are many questions here about what constitutes 'form', how much of a role 'luck' plays, and why some players are so much more consistent than others. I will deal with some of these issues later in the book, but suspend your disbelief for now.

If you feel that your general form at a tournament is somewhere around 60% of your best and you come to the board hoping to do your best on the day, you can only give 100% of what you have to give, i.e. make full use of the 60% you have. Thus if you want to optimize your performance it seems much better to work on raising the 60% and only *then* try to give your best at the board. That is one of the meanings of the quotation at the start of this section. You can come to the board and try to give your absolute best, but you are unlikely to succeed unless you maximized your chances of doing your best before you came to the board.

But is there anything you can do about your general form, or your general mood, or your general energy levels? I think there is, but I accept that there are limitations. In the case in question I suggested that the player, who appeared to be temporarily fed up of chess, should put his preparation to one side and get out of his hotel room and go for a walk to some music. He did this and said he felt better afterwards. It's hard to say whether it worked, but he did draw from a difficult position the next day and finished the tournament without losing any more games. I would say that he raised his general form to about 70% of his best and then gave 100% of that in the remaining games. It was still a very bad result overall, but it wasn't a complete disaster, and that was a success given his early score and state of mind during the tournament.

So what can you do before the game, to help yourself to give your best? All I can suggest is what works for me. There are plenty of other approaches that might help, but the key message to take from this chapter is not to take yourself for granted. Don't assume that you are capable of always giving your best at the board, but rest assured that if you take time to observe yourself closely before the game starts, you are more likely to play well.

Here are three questions worth considering before each game:

1) Have I tuned my air guitar?

If we want to get to the top of the mountain and just sit at the bottom thinking about it, it's not going to happen. It is through the effort, the actual climbing of the mountain, the taking of one step after another, that the summit is reached ... But effort has to be balanced. Being very tense and anxious is a great hindrance. Energy has to be balanced with tranquillity. It is as if you are trying to tune the strings on a guitar. If they are too tight or too loose, the sound is not right ... We have to be persistent and persevering but with a relaxed and balanced mind, making the effort without forcing.
JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN (1976)

Goldstein's words strike a deep chord with my experience of effort in chess, and the pun is fully intentional. Comparing balanced effort to a well-tuned guitar string makes good sense, and is well worth reflecting on before your game. The trouble is that you are unlikely to have a guitar handy... However, it is not too much trouble to take an 'air guitar' with you to your games, with the aim of tuning it before you start.

For those of you wondering what an 'air guitar' looks like, try the following: take your hands off the book, bend your left arm as if doing a bicep curl and put it out to your left side with your fingers poised as if uncomfortably clutching a bag of marbles. Now, with your right hand, scratch just outside of your solar plexus. And there you have it, your very own air guitar! To give the instrument some credibility, you might consider singing a little, though in certain cases an 'air voice' might be more advisable. For those thinking that I just made all that up, it is worth reflecting on the fact that one of the first things sold on the Internet site *eBay* was an air guitar, and it was described by the seller as 'a majestic instrument'!

Even if you take yourself too seriously to consider tuning an air guitar, it is important to bear in mind that your effort is something that you can control. However, it's not at all easy to get the right level of effort and you have to find a balance between being a zealous egomaniac lusting for victory and dripping like a wet lettuce resigned to a good shredding. This resonates with Alekhine's suggestion that a chess master should be a combination of a beast of prey and a monk. The only way to achieve this kind of balance is to become more aware of your thoughts and desires and how these things fluctuate on any given day. Crucially, this has to be done *before* the game.

2) Where are my butterflies?

It's alright to have butterflies in your stomach, just get them to fly in formation.
ROB GILBERT

For those who have never heard of it, the idiom "to have butterflies in one's stomach" means to have nerves or to feel a little jumpy. My feeling is that nerves are basically good for you, and if you feel no nerves about the game you are about to play, it is generally a bad sign. However, it is equally important not to feel debilitated by your nerves. To my mind, the ideal state is vigilance combined with confidence, but with just a little preference for the latter – so that's vigilant confidence rather than confident vigilance!

It might sound absurd, but asking yourself "Where are my butterflies?" is a way of asking yourself if you care about the game you are about to play. If there are no butterflies whatsoever, you should ask yourself why: has the prospect of losing not occurred to you, or perhaps you are bored by the prospect of playing? Likewise if there are far too many butterflies, and they are flying about so much that you can't

sit still, then it's time to get them into line. Sometimes simply noticing them is enough to do that, but it's also worth trying to get things into perspective and be mindful of the fact that while the game you are about to play is important, there are (hopefully) more important things in your life and they will all still be there (hopefully) when the game is over.

3) Do I want to play or do I just want to win?

In general, I think if you look forward to playing something and enjoy it, then it works out well.
VISWANATHAN ANAND

In my experience, something very important happens at the moment you see who you are due to be playing against. Watch your thoughts at this moment. The pairings go up and usually you will have a reaction along the lines of 'good, I fancy my chances there' or 'damn, I have Black again, and I'm playing that annoying guy who glares at you between moves'. Sometimes you even get annoyed when you notice that one of your rivals has a much easier pairing, and get distracted from your own task. Sometimes you start telling yourself stories about your victory or defeat before the game has even started.

All of these reactions suggest a kind of slackness – that you don't really care about the battle that is about to commence but rather about the result it will lead to. It's really crucial that you enjoy playing as well as winning. If you really love playing, winning is part of that love and striving for it will be seamless and natural. But if you just want to win, the game itself and the difficult decisions it involves can seem like drudgery and you are less likely to care about them, so it will be much harder to win!

So you should ask yourself: do I want to be here, playing chess, at all? If you find that the answer is 'no, not really' then you can either carry on regardless and hope for the best, or you can remind yourself of why you like the game, and the kind of happiness that playing it has brought you in the past. You can also face up to the fact that if you have to play a game of chess, you might as well enjoy it!

In addition to these questions I like to remind myself of some of my typical mistakes, like losing my sense of danger when things seem to be going well, or losing concentration in winning positions. I have enough experience now to know that you cannot just think these problems away, because some of them are deeply ingrained in our characters and are best described as 'habit energy'. However, sometimes simply acknowledging the existence of habit energy is enough to slacken the power it holds over us. Therefore before most games I try to follow the counsel of my favourite Buddhist writer Thich Nhat Hanh who reminds us to say to ourselves: **"Hello Habit energy, I see you!"**

Conclusions:

One of the main attractions of chess is that it affords us the opportunity for the rewarding experience of concentration. However, concentration comes in varying degrees and it is not always easy to find the right level of concentration for our games. I believe that the surest way to improve our results is to practice solving complex problems at home, and to do this as often as possible, in a timed and disciplined manner. This helps to make concentrating more habitual and therefore makes it easier for us to focus at critical points in our own games. I have also suggested that we should observe ourselves closely before we play, so that we maximize our chances of being suitably concentrated at the board.

Part 2: A Mental Toolkit for the Exponential Jungle

Welcome to the most 'chessy' part of the book. Taken as a whole, the following five chapters are relatively heavy on chess annotations and relatively light on philosophy. For some of you that will be disappointing, but I suspect that most of you will feel quite relieved!

Chapter 6 contains some challenging ideas and functions as a bridge between the first and second parts of the book. I offer some of my thoughts on what makes chess such a difficult game, and in the process I mention 'the exponential jungle' which refers to the bewildering range of possibilities latent in chess positions. Chapter 7 presents some of the conceptual tools that I use to get through this jungle, and Chapters 8, 9 and 10 introduce some different mental attitudes that might be needed along the way.

This part of the book includes the games and positions that have made the deepest impression on me over the last five years, and the concepts used to organize the material are designed to help the reader make more sense of some of the arguments about the difference between playing Black and White in Part 3.

6 Why is Chess so Difficult?

Those who say they understand chess, understand nothing.
ROBERT HÜBNER

The Exponential Problem

A few months ago, I advised a student of around 2000 strength to try to analyse one complicated game deeply and carefully. I asked him to keep on honing and revising his findings until he felt confident that I wouldn't find any major mistakes in the analysis. I encouraged him not to use any analysis engines until he had given it his best effort. He was not allowed to make generalizations about the position and not allowed to stop with the assessment that the position was 'unclear' unless he could demonstrate the effort he had made to find clarity. He is a diligent student and keen to improve, but looking at a complicated game in depth until he understood it move by move, variation by variation, proved to be too much for him. He devoted a few study sessions to this task, a couple of hours at a time, but he came back to me and said that he was 'scared' to do any more. Whenever he tried to look at the position without prejudices he felt 'lost' and 'helpless' and this gave rise to a sense of despair. It was clear to me that he had glimpsed what Nabakov called "the abysmal depths of chess".

When you have been playing for decades, it's easy to forget that a defining characteristic of our beloved game is that is ridiculously hard. Philosopher John Searle captures the core of the problem: "The difficulty with chess is that the numbers become astronomical very fast. If you just multiply: I have eight possible moves, you have eight counter-moves. I have eight counter-moves to each one of your eight counter-moves and you have eight counter-moves to each one of my counter-moves. It's soon ... the numbers are as big as the universe. So the problem with chess has always been: How the hell do you solve the exponential problem? How do you solve the problem of the sheer size of the numbers involved?"

That quotation came from the DVD *Game Over: Kasparov against the machines.* In the context of Deep Blue the answer to Searle's question was "brute force". This proved to be possible for a custom-built digital machine created for the sole purpose of defeating the world champion, but if you are made of flesh and blood there is no such option. We can't begin to solve the exponential problem through brute force, so how do we begin to tackle it? When you put it this way, the mystery is not why chess is so difficult, but why it makes sense to us at all.

The reason we have the impression that we sometimes understand chess is that we have gradually and painstakingly acquired 'concepts' that act as a filter to sort the wheat from the chaff[8]. Most of the time we don't really feel the number problem, because most of the 'numbers' have been filtered away by our sense of what makes moves relevant or irrelevant, good or bad. These concepts include our notion of material value, so in general we don't look at a line where we give away our queen for a pawn, because we know there is no point. There are also strategic concepts about controlling the centre, so when we are preparing we look at the main lines after 1 e4 and 1 d4, but not so much at 1 ♘h3 or 1 h4. We also know that the aim of the game is to checkmate the opponent's king before he checkmates ours, so if our king is under attack we think about defending it or counterattacking, not about an irrelevant move on the other side of the board. By means of these concepts we limit our attention to the moves that seem to us to be good and relevant, and although the exponential problem remains

theoretically at large, it is tamed by our concepts, and we can carry on playing chess as if we knew what we were doing.

However, while these concepts act as an absolutely essential perceptual filter, they are often victims of their own success. Sometimes we use them as tools to cut down thickets in the exponential jungle, but sometimes it seems that we are used by them, and cease to be able to see or think without them. Indeed, clarifying what these concepts are and how they operate is difficult because we think with them and through them. They come from our 'folk psychology' (Chapter 2), are reflected in the language we use to talk about the game, and they strongly influence our sense of what is possible on the board. The stronger you become, the more you can free yourself from these concepts, and think of the position in front of you with a relatively streamlined perceptual filter (nobody has access to the position 'as it is'), but most players cannot make sense of positions without invoking ideas of material, pawn-structure, attack, plan, etc. In the next chapter I present some of the concepts that work best for me, but for now I want to focus on the reasons why chess remains difficult not only in spite of our concepts, but also because of them.

We have already dealt with the more directly psychological part of this issue in Part 1 of the book, and in the next chapter I revisit the way it manifests itself in our positional categories, with special attention to the way we carve up chess positions with categories like Material and Time. Our concepts and categories give us a way to deal with the exponential problem, so the difficulty of chess is more subtle and more interesting. In most cases the difficulty stems from having to juggle so many different ideas at any one time. You have to think about what you are trying to do and what your opponent is trying to do. That is already quite a lot, but then you have to think about how the two sets of intentions relate to each other, and this 'how' includes everything from pawn-structure, hanging pieces, diagonals, king safety, transitions, exchanges, prophylaxis, attack, defence, etc., etc., etc. It is asking a lot of the human brain to consider all these manifold factors, but asking even more for these factors to be evaluated, compared, and acted upon. This problem, of having to think of so many things at once before making a good decision, is the problem of **'cognitive load'** – a metaphorical term that refers to the amount of information in the mind at any one time. I believe part of the reason chess is so hard is that we need words to combat cognitive load. However, words often create as many problems as they solve because they get in the way of the images we use to think during the game.

Words

People put too much trust in words... They string empty words together to create an illusion of understanding. Everyone can spout generalities about the essence of a position, but nobody profits from it.
SIMON ALAPIN

A thorough philosophical analysis of the role of language in chess might be very interesting, but my focus for now is to explore the role words play in making chess difficult, over and above the role that they play in chess myths and storytelling[9]. Chess concepts are learnt through examples but they are expressed in words, so concepts like 'two bishops in an open position', 'backward pawn', 'open file' and 'endgame' are coded in a certain way, and this coding usually corresponds to some kind of image of the board combined with a verbal description of that image.

My impression is that the words associated with the images cause problems in chess because they give, as Alapin puts it, 'an illusion of understanding'. It is one thing to use words to describe a game or instruct someone away from the board, but when we use them to think during a game, they often give a misleading take on what is happening in the position. When we are playing a game of chess, our mental picture of the board is a picture of images, and moves are considered as shifts in those images. Chess moves, and the relationships between the pieces, cannot be reduced to a verbal description without distortion, and any verbal account can only

ever describe what is happening in a position in very approximate terms.

But who needs words anyway? It seems to me that the weaker you are, the more likely you are to make more use of them, but it only recently made sense to me why this might be so. I think it has something to do with trying to hold all the images in mind at one time, and find out how they relate to each other. In this sense it is a classic meaning-making operation; the words are the glue that we use to make the images stick to each other in some sort of meaningful pattern.

When we are immersed in a position, we are thinking in the realm of images or pictures. These images can be more or less abstract, and, as I argue in *7DCS*, I believe that the stronger you become as a player, the more abstract is your vision of the board. This may sound confusing, but by 'abstract' I mean relatively free of irrelevant content rather than 'obscure'. What grandmasters perceive are sets of shifting patterns and relationships and these are being constructed on the basis of experience, with minimal conscious effort. When I 'see' a position, the image seems to have no dimensions, the chess set has no colour, the pieces have no size and shape. I am 'seeing' relationships and thinking of goals, not taking photographs.

To some extent, you have to take my word for this, but it is based on more than my own interpretation of my own experience. Most grandmasters don't give such things much thought, but those I have asked have, on reflection, concurred that 'the chessboard in their head' is hard to pin down, and not like any chessboard in the outside world. This is perhaps the cognitive basis for the superior 'know-how' of grandmasters.

When I suggested in *7DCS* that stronger players think with relatively abstract visual images, I didn't fully understand why this might be so. Now it makes more sense to me in light of what psychology tells us about 'cognitive load'. The classic exposition of cognitive load was Miller's (1956) where he tried to show that, at least in certain domains, the mind was only capable of holding seven units of information, plus or minus two. However, Miller's paper was written at a time when it was thought that there was only one memory system. This gradually changed over the ensuing years and Miller's 'immediate memory' evolved into the concept of 'working memory' that describes more than just a memory system holding a certain number of small pieces of information. Furthermore, the consensus in the field is now that the number of elements that can be stored and processed depends a great deal on what we mean by 'elements'.

What we deem to be an element in chess depends on which patterns we recognize, and how good we are at 'chunking' a position into as few elements as possible. What is a single element consisting of a single idea for a grandmaster (e.g. standard castled position) may be several elements consisting of several ideas for a player less skilled at managing cognitive load (♔g1, ♖f1, ♙h2, g2, f2). In chess games there are several 'elements' to keep in mind, and the number reduces or increases depending on a player's ability to chunk elements together.

Clearly it is difficult to store and process all the relevant elements at the same time, which is one of the reasons why chess is so challenging. More usefully, my impression is that 'cognitive load' is one of the main limiting factors in solving problems over the board, and some of the literature on problem-solving, e.g. Case (1981), strongly suggests that strategies for reducing cognitive load are very effective in helping people towards solutions. This is important because one big problem in chess is holding all the information in mind in one mental 'gulp' and then trying to think with any part of that, without dropping the vision of the whole.[10]

For an example of how the reduction of cognitive load operates in chess, consider the ending in the 'Lazy Detective' section in Chapter 5. In the line where Black is placed in zugzwang and has to give up his bishop, White has to decide which pawn to take with his bishop in order to get his king through. You could look at each capture individually, but in the process you have to hold a lot of information in mind and might get confused. It helps a lot if you realize that taking on g6, f7, or e6 leads to exactly the same structure and are therefore equivalent, while taking on d5 is distinct because it allows you to play e6.

On a related point, Perkins (1985) makes the pertinent remark "It is useful to view thinking as involving *encoding* the matter thought about and *operating* on the encoded representation to achieve some *goal*." As I mentioned in Chapter 2, the encoding stage (what's going on here?) is important, because that often determines the thoughts that follow. My impression is that a grandmaster's coding will be almost entirely of abstract images and relationships and non-verbal, while a weaker player will encode the position by consciously trying to apply certain concepts in a verbal form. Without the words, there would be too much to take in. The words are used by weaker players in an attempt to reduce the problem of cognitive load – a problem that a grandmaster very rarely feels[11].

The point is that while weaker players are seeing snap-shots of positions, with conceptual labels attached, grandmasters are seeing relationships, and move through variations without explicit corresponding images in mind. The cognitive load of the grandmaster is therefore much less. We can move through variations relatively easily because we do not have to 'hold' the picture of the position in mind at every stage. It is relatively easy for us to bind the various important aspects of each position together so that we can start 'working on them'. We can do this because the forms of the position are so familiar to us that we don't have to pause at every turn and take in the content. We don't waste much cognitive capacity holding the position in mind, so we can move from position to position much more fluently (to use a choice word) than if we have to struggle to hold the various aspects of the position in mind, and use words to explain to ourselves how it all fits together.

It seems to me that the reason weaker players rely on words is that they need them to attack the cognitive load, in an effort to break it down so that their thoughts can move forward. GMs have less need to do that, because their relatively abstract 'vision' of the position means that the problem of cognitive load arises much more rarely, and usually only in very complicated positions.

This diagnosis does not readily lend itself to a cure. However, it is a further aspect of the distinction made in Chapter 1 between knowledge and skill. To reduce the role of words in your thinking during play, you need to practice thinking about positions with as few prejudices as possible and observe your thoughts closely to watch for the pseudo-explanatory verbal 'solutions'. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, this can be quite a scary experience. Glimpsing 'the abysmal depths of chess' is highly worthwhile, but only in moderation. However, if you can manage it, and if it doesn't put you off chess completely, it should help you to start building resistance against one of the main habits of mind that prevents you from improving.

'Anomie'

"I do not like it." – "Why?"
"I am not up to it."
Has anyone ever answered like that?
NIETZSCHE

'Anomie' literally means 'without law' and comes from Greek. It describes the condition of a society in which the norms of behaviour have become confused, and when it is no longer clear what is allowed and what is not. In such conditions, those who depend on rules for their sense of order become nervous because they suddenly have to think for themselves, but given that the norms have broken down, they don't know what to think with, or about.

In chess we have some firm formal rules to combat the feeling of anomie, so when you sit down to play there is no real fear that you opponents will move their knights differently, or try to castle out of check. However, for many players there is a growing sense of anomie concerning the value of the pieces and the rules of chess strategy. Some players don't accept that anomie applies to chess, some accept it and absolutely love it, and many accept it but don't particularly like it.

While it is true that there are no longer any canonical rules of chess strategy, it isn't true that there are no guidelines. All that has happened, it

seems to me, is that we have realized that chess is too vast and complex to be tightly schematized, but the game is still comprehensible enough to lend itself to useful heuristics.

And yet the 'debate' over the existence of chess rules seems to go on in certain circles. For instance, not so long ago there was an online discussion between respected chess authors John Watson and Jacob Aagaard. The former seemed to be arguing, in line with his original arguments in *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy* that chess strategy is now largely 'rule-independent' and the latter was denying this and claiming that knowing and following strategic rules is still an essential element of good chess. I am not sure this is a fair characterization of the discussion, but with regard to rules in chess, my impression is that the authors were to some extent talking at cross-purposes. Part of the problem is that there seems to be an implicit 'pre/trans fallacy' in the debate. The 'pre/trans fallacy' is a term used by American polymath Ken Wilber to discuss non-rational ideas. For instance, reading tea-leaves would be considered 'pre-rational' while certain meditative states would be considered 'trans-rational'. These levels are easily confused because they are both 'non-rational'. Transferring this nomenclature to chess, 'rule-independence' is ambiguous, and can be taken to mean 'pre-rules', in that there are no rules of chess strategy – beginners who don't know that a knight is generally poorly placed on the rim fall into this category, or 'trans-rules', in the sense that rules have not been rejected but rather deeply absorbed and subsumed by a much more concrete approach to chess. I think this is what Watson is getting at, and perhaps expressing it in this way makes the point even clearer, but in any case I believe some confusion was created by ambiguity in the word 'independence'.

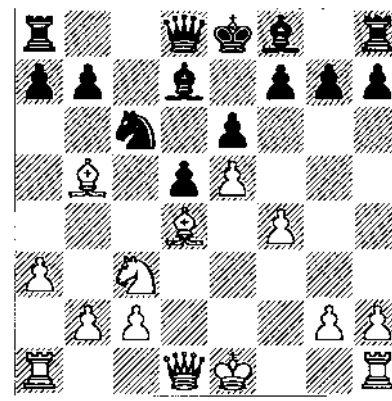
The discussion about rules will continue, because aspiring players are hungry for firm positional guidelines, and many think that these guidelines should be considered as rules. In any case, anomie refers to a more general breakdown of order, and my impression is that the experience of anomie is most profound with respect to material considerations in chess. Without the ability to rank the value of the pieces, most of us feel totally lost. And yet it is increasingly clear that good chess requires a much more nuanced understanding of material value. This is considered more fully in the next chapter, but I have chosen to present the following game now because it shows the positive side of anomie, and the beautiful ideas that lie in wait for those who do not mourn the loss of chess rules and guidelines, but succeed in transcending them.

Gelfand – Adams

FIDE Candidates match (game 6), Wijk aan Zee 1994

1 d4 d6 2 e4 ♘f6 3 f3 d5 4 e5 ♘fd7 5 f4 c5 6 ♘f3 ♘c6 7 ♗e3 cxd4 8 ♘xd4 ♘xd4 9 ♗xd4 ♘b8 10 ♘c3 ♘c6 11 ♗b5 e6 12 a3!? ♗d7 *(D)*

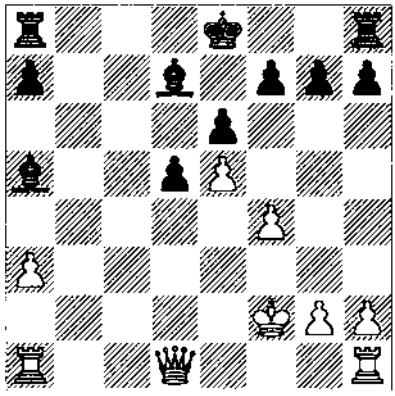
W



13 ♗xc6 ♗xc6?

I am not sure if any of Adams's previous moves were inaccurate, but if they were, they certainly weren't obvious mistakes. In any case, instead of this routine recapture he had to find an extraordinary idea to hold the positional balance. Here is how Gelfand expresses it: "Now White's positional advantage is unquestioned. Strong measures were called for:" 13...bxc6 14 ♘a4 (14 b4 a5) 14...♕a5+ 15 c3 c5 16 ♘xc5 ♗xc5 17 b4 ♗xd4!! (17...♗xb4 18 axb4 ♕c7 19 ♗c5 is very clearly better for White) 18 bxa5 ♗xc3+ 19 ♔f2 ♗xa5! *(D).*

This is the key concept that Black had to find to get an acceptable game. Rather than take the rook on a1, the bishop heads to b6 and Black



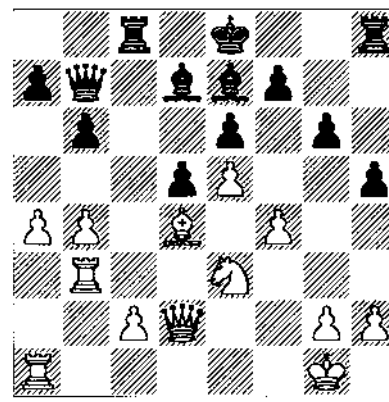
plays to open the position with ...f6 and hassle the white king. In Gelfand's words: "Black has just two bishops and a pawn for the queen, but White's king is misplaced and may come under attack." It is noteworthy that Gelfand doesn't give any kind of formal assessment like 'slightly better for White'. In such unbalanced positions that kind of device is especially unhelpful.

This fantastic idea of swapping a queen for two bishops, a pawn and some opportunities reminds me of a quotation by Huang-Po: **"The foolish reject what they see, not what they think; the wise reject what they think, not what they see."** It takes enormous resistance to conventional ideas to see such a variation, and yet it is a natural outcome of looking at the position relatively free from prejudice. You start with 13...bxc6 and then White has to stop ...c5 and you see that 14 ♘a4 is the best way to do this. Then you notice that Black can give a check and that White has to block it with c3. Then you see that Black can achieve ...c5 and it is looking promising, but then you see an annoying trick that seems to allow White to keep control. I am not sure what happens at that moment, but this is where you might start to think "It might be that my position is just worse" and become defeatist. Instead you should 'reject what you think, not what you see', and what do you see? After 17 b4 Black can take the knight on d4 and then a pawn on c3 with check. This involves giving up the queen, which is hard to accept, but if you see this as permissible and keep on looking at the position, you see that it is far from clear.

On a point of move-order, Gelfand merely gives 19...♗xa5 as interesting and 19...0-0 as the main line, adding that Black needs his dark-squared bishop to disturb the opponent's king. After 19...0-0 Gelfand gives 20 ♖c1 ♗xa5 followed by ...f6.

However, I think 19...0-0 is inaccurate due to 20 a6!?. Now the straightforward 20...♗xa1 21 ♕xa1 ♗b5 22 ♖c1 ♗xa6 23 ♖c7 gives White control. And the more challenging 20...♗b5 21 ♖b1 ♗xa6 22 ♕a4 ♗c4 23 ♖b7 leaves White with the initiative. Black cannot play 23...f6 due to 24 ♕d7 so his next move will be a difficult one. I am not sure if this detail is an important one, but what is clear is that Black should avoid 19...♗xa1? 20 ♕xa1, when White's queen and rook will quickly cause trouble and White's king is not in any danger.

14 0-0 g6 15 ♕d2 ♕c7 16 ♖f3 b6 17 ♘d1! h5 18 a4! ♗c5 19 ♖c3 ♗e7 20 b4 ♕b7 21 ♖b3 ♗d7 22 ♘e3 ♖c8 *(D)*



23 a5?!

Missing Black's reply. 23 f5! ♗g5 and now both 24 f6 and 24 fxg6 are promising for White, according to Gelfand.

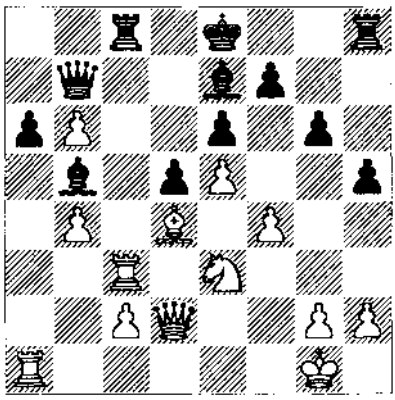
23...♗b5! 24 axb6 a6!

Another instructive detail that would have been hard to foresee. Black's best move is to give White a protected (by the bishop) passed pawn on the sixth rank! After the more conventional 24...axb6 25 ♖ba3 White seizes the a-file and increases the pressure.

25 ♖c3 *(D)*

25...♔d7?

B



"Too frivolous" according to Gelfand, who suggests that "Black should have calculated a lengthy variation:" 25...♖xc3 26 ♕xc3 ♔d7 27 ♗c5 ♖c8 28 ♕d4 ♖xc5!! 29 bxc5 ♕c6 30 ♔h1 (30 b7 ♔c7! and 30 c4 ♗xc4 31 b7 ♔c7 32 ♕b2 ♗b5 are both fine for Black) 30...♗xc5 31 ♕d2 ♕xb6. Gelfand gives this as slightly better for White but also adds the note "with good chances of defending successfully".

This is another extraordinary line, and shows the difference between superficial wood pushing and a deep analytical approach. The common theme in these lines is that they appear to be 'anomic' in the sense that they make sense on their own terms, but not in terms of any chess norms or rules.

26 ♖c5!

"Having created an outpost on c5, White can open up the game with the help of his c-pawn." – Gelfand. The notes that follow this move suggest that White is winning for here on. I like the way that Gelfand nonchalantly gives up the exchange, and Adams doesn't take it. This doesn't surprise me, but I suspect it might surprise some readers. The point is that the pieces are being used to achieve very specific strategic goals (in this case White's aim is to play c4) and whatever static value the pieces have is almost completely irrelevant. Gelfand went on to win quite smoothly:

26...♖xc5 27 bxc5 ♖c8 28 c4 dxc4 29 ♖c1 ♔e8 30 ♘xc4 ♕d5 31 ♘a5 ♗c6 32 ♗e3 ♕e4 33 ♘xc6 ♕xc6 34 h3 ♕b5 35 ♕c2 ♕c6 36 ♔h2 a5 37 ♖a1 ♖a8 38 ♖a4 h4 39 ♕a2 ♕b5 40 ♕c4 ♕c6 41 ♕a2 ♕b5 42 c6 ♕xc6 43 ♖xa5 ♖b8 44 ♖a7 ♕e4 45 ♕b3 ♔f8 46 ♖d7 g5 47 ♖d4 ♕f5 48 ♖c4 ♖b7 49 ♖c8+ ♔g7 50 ♖c7 gxf4 51 ♗d4 ♕e4 52 ♕f3 1-0

One of the features of anomie is not knowing what to do, and this often shows itself in relation to planning. On what basis can we make a plan? Is that even the right question to ask?

Planning in Pencil and Playing in Pen

"What went wrong with your plan?"
"He didn't follow it!"
Conversation between participants after a Korchnoi simul

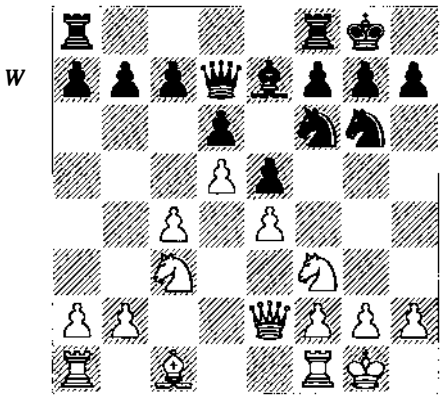
What's my plan? This question already contains the seeds of a mistake, because it implies that you can make a plan independently of your opponent. The only plan that is worth having is an adaptable plan, and one that takes the opponent's ideas into account. What matters is not that you have an idea of how the next ten moves will develop, but that your moves remain purposeful. You might even say that in most positions what you need is not so much a plan, but a purpose. It is important that each move makes some sort of sense, but that sense might be very modest or short-term. In any case, you cannot take moves back, and in this sense they are like indelible ink. This is what I mean by 'playing in pen' – being aware of the finality and significance of each move. However, our moves don't always fit together in a single coherent pattern, and sometimes they veer off at a tangent to deal with an emergency, like an unexpected attack on your king.

In this respect I think we should make our plans in the same way that we 'pencil in' meetings that we cannot be sure will transpire. We work towards them and intend to make them happen, but we know that life is unpredictable, and something else might turn up. This switching between modes is difficult, because we have to be resolute in our moves while being flexible with our purposes and plans. The following

hopefully gives an idea of how this works in practice:

Rowson – R. McKay
Marymass 2002

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♗b5 ♘f6 4 0-0 d6 5 d4 ♗d7 6 d5 ♘e7 7 ♗xd7+ ♕xd7 8 ♕e2 ♘g6 9 c4 ♗e7 10 ♘c3 0-0 *(D)*



It's time to think about what I am going to do next. I have more space but Black is not particularly cramped and has pending counterplay in the form of ...♘h5-f4, ..f5, and ...c6. The priority is to keep these ideas at bay and gradually make an impression on the queenside.

11 ♘e1!

Sometimes ♘c2-e3-f5 might be a theme, but the main idea is to support a c5 push with ♘d3 and also to bolster the kingside with f3 when ...f5 eventually happens. Moreover, I have always had a slightly irrational fear of the manoeuvre ...♘h5-f4, so I was pleased to prevent that for the time being. ♘e1 is therefore a purposeful move but it is not attached to any single plan.

11...c6

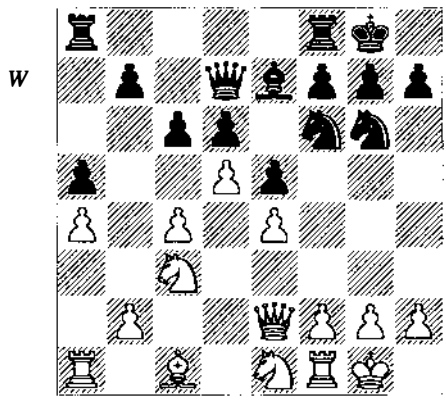
OK, so should I carry on with what I began with ♘e1? I could do, but it is important to see what ...c6 has changed. It is not just a pawn-break, it also introduces the positional threat of bringing the black bishop to the d8-a5 diagonal. Is there anything I can do about that?

12 a4!

Good. Gaining a bit more space and preventing Black from improving his bishop. Now if 12...♗d8 I have 13 a5!. I am quite sure that my tendency to think of this sort of thing came from studying examples of prophylaxis in the Dvoretsky/Yusupov literature.

Note that a4 wasn't part of the plan when I played 11 ♘e1, but I realized that I had a new priority. ♘e1 was a useful move, and although I planned to move the knight again, after ...c6 I had to react to something else.

12...a5 *(D)*



I was pleased to see this, because it means that Black can never take on d5 without giving me a lot of important light squares. Of course, Black is under no obligation to take on d5, but I have noticed that it is awkward to create positional tension unless you can release it quite easily.

13 ♘d3?!

This is slightly sloppy – I was relying on some slightly vague ideas of playing c5. More consistent would be 13 h3 (to prevent ...♘g4) 13...♗d8 14 ♗e3, when I keep good control and can bring my knight to d3 on the next move.

13...♗d8 14 ♖d1

Trying to make his queen a bit nervous and discouraging ...♗b6.

14...♖e8

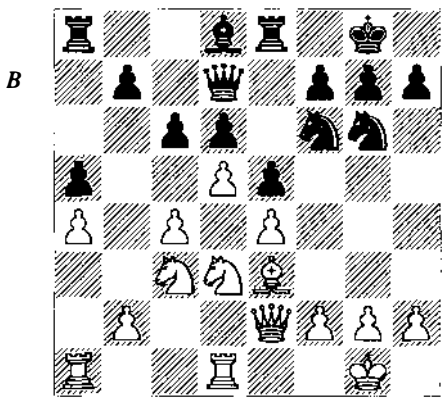
A decent waiting move, with the idea that ...♘f4 will gain in strength, but Black should certainly have looked closely at activating his bishop by 14...♗b6!?. Then:

a) 15 c5!? was my "that'll scare him" bluff, but a closer look suggests that it's not so serious for Black. After 15...♗xc5 16 ♘xc5 dxc5 17

♗g5 I have definite compensation, but probably only slightly more than a pawn's worth. Black's position is better than it was on move 14.

b) Roddy was more afraid of 15 ♗g5 with the idea of taking on f6, but given that my knights are so far from controlling f5 and Black's bishop would then be unopposed, I didn't think this would be very good. After something like 15...♗d4 (15...♘e8!? looks passive, but playable) my impression was that Black had little to fear. However, as is often the case, a closer look reveals a different story: 16 ♗xf6 gxf6 17 ♕f3! intending ♘e2-g3 gives White control. If Black tries to stop this with 17...♗xc3 18 bxc3! ♔g7 then 19 ♖fb1 leaves White in control.

15 ♗e3 *(D)*



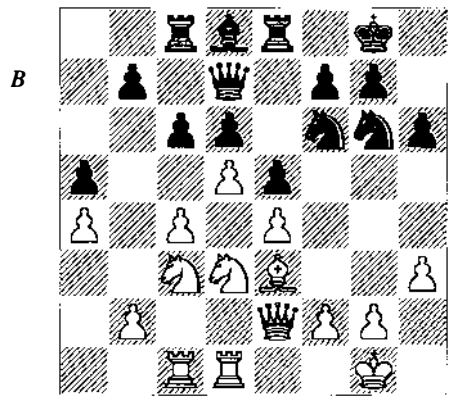
15...h6

But this is one half-move too many. Black should have taken the plunge with 15...♘g4. Then 16 c5 looks scary, but Black can hold. In some ways my well-groomed horses are merely getting in the way. After 16...♘xe3 17 ♕xe3 ♗e7 it's hard to see a convincing continuation, and I could even become worse if I am not careful; e.g., 18 cxd6 ♗xd6 19 dxc6 bxc6 20 ♖ac1 ♖ab8 and Black's structure is actually the more secure because although he has more pawn-islands, White's knights will struggle to control all the important squares: b2, b3, d4, f4 and c4. Black should have considered closing the position with 15...c5!?.

16 h3!

Now I felt like I had control.

16...♖c8 17 ♖ac1 *(D)*



17...cxd5?!

Understandable, in that White was beginning to threaten things with dxc6 and c5, but even so, this is a concession, and it's not clear that Black would be worse off if he just let me try to do something. In this respect, the unpretentious 17...♖f8!? might be an improvement.

18 cxd5 ♖f8

The immediate exchange sacrifice is not so strong: 18...♖xc3 19 bxc3! ♘xe4 20 ♕g4!.

19 b3!

A new possibility resulting from Black's premature exchange. Now ♘b2-c4 will be devastating if Black allows it, so Roddy was right to want to change the character of the position.

19...♔h7?!

But there was no need for this – the king turns out to be vulnerable on this square. 19...♖xc3! 20 ♖xc3 ♘xe4 gives Black a slightly better version of the game, and White is only a little better.

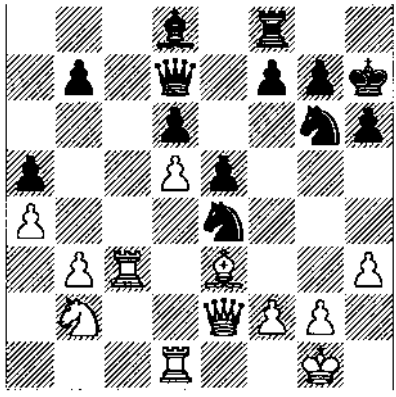
20 ♘b2 ♖xc3! 21 ♖xc3 ♘xe4 *(D)*

22 ♖c4!

A clear and practical approach, intending to give the exchange back. It was possible to keep the extra exchange but I did not want to lose the initiative in the run-up to the time-control on move 36. 22 ♖c2 f5 23 ♘c4 ♘f6 24 ♗c1 with advantage is probably best from an objective point of view, but it was hard to gauge the extent of Black's counterplay at the time and the pawns on f5 and e5 combined with the knights on g6 and f6 made me fear for the health of my king.

22...f5 23 ♖xe4! fxe4

W

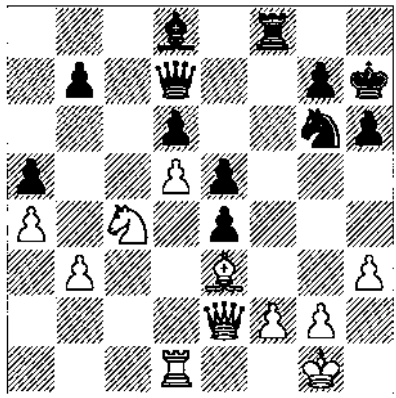


This type of approach, where Black gives up the exchange for a pawn and some play, and I immediately return it to regain control of the position, is fairly typical of modern chess, where the initiative is prized so highly. Moreover, it's a good example of how your thinking becomes more flexible when you are relatively unencumbered by the fourth deadly chess sin – *Materialism* (see *7DCS* for further pointers!).

24 ♘c4 *(D)*

I thought this was inaccurate at the time, but in fact it's the best move. 24 ♕c2 ♕f5 25 ♘c4 ♗e7 26 ♘d2 (26 ♘xa5!? looks possible now, but it's not very practical to go so far away from the kingside) 26...♘f4 27 ♘xe4 (27 ♕xe4? ♘e2+! 28 ♔h2 ♘c3) 27...♕g6 28 ♗xf4 exf4 is not so clear, because the position has opened up and Black's bishop has good prospects (it might come to e5).

B



24...b5!

I underestimated this move, which considerably relieves Black's position.

25 axb5 ♕xb5 26 ♕c2 ♗e7 27 ♕xe4 ♕xb3!

Correctly eliminating another pawn. Now all I have are active better pieces and some initiative, but it's enough to keep the pressure on over the next few moves.

28 ♖b1 ♕a4!

Giving a pawn back to get the queens off.

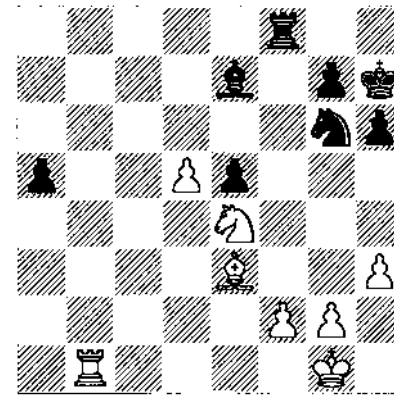
28...♕a2 29 ♖b6 yields serious pressure. As well as the obvious threat of ♘xd6 I am also poised to play h4, or maybe ♔h2 with the well-hidden threat of ♘xe5 (currently not possible due to ...♕a1+).

29 ♘xd6!

29 ♖b7 looks tempting, but then Black has 29...♖c8! and if 30 ♘xd6?, then 30...♕d1+.

29...♕xe4 30 ♘xe4 *(D)*

B



The game has been complicated and in flux, but now it seems to have stabilized. White has the more active pieces and fewer weaknesses, and Roddy was also behind on the clock. However, Black has decent drawing chances due to the reduced material and counterplay based on the passed a-pawn. Roddy played his next move too quickly, and missed a chance to steer the game towards a draw.

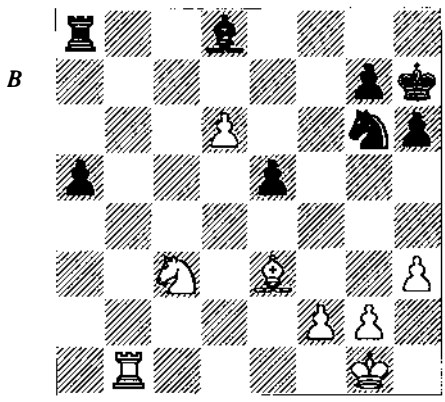
30...♖a8?

A classical move, getting the rook behind the main asset. To make such a mistake is highly forgivable, especially because I have to be very accurate to show that it's a mistake.

However, 30...♗b4! is better. After this solid move it is difficult for White to do anything

serious before Black centralizes his king. In that case, a draw seems the most likely result.

31 d6! ♗d8 32 ♘c3!! *(D)*



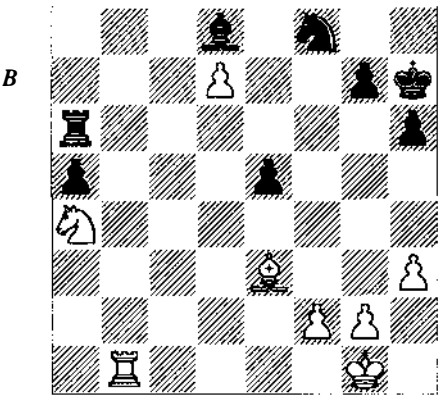
A decisive move from a practical point of view. I think this idea also came to me from studying some examples of 'prophylaxis' in the Dvoretsky/Yusupov literature. By looking at the position after 30...♖a8 from Black's perspective, I realized that he was reliant on pushing his a-pawn and that if I could take time out to hold up the a-pawn while still supporting my own passed pawn, Black's position would become difficult.

32 ♘c3 is therefore another case of what I mean by 'planning in pencil and playing in pen'. The e4-knight is clearly a strong piece, and it seems strange that I should move it when I can make so many other moves. However, it was only after Black's last move that the emphasis shifted from the centre and the kingside to the passed a-pawn. The knight looked optimally placed on e4, but in fact it's the only piece that can comfortably hold back the a-pawn. Now Black's danger man is dealt with, and 'Delroy' (White's passed d-pawn) remains well supported. If it weren't for this move, Black's a-pawn would give serious counterplay, Roddy would have been sure of at least his next two moves and an exchange of a-pawn for d-pawn would be likely. However, now there is a big difference in the strength of the passed pawns because my knight on a4 will block Black's pawn while still indirectly assisting my own. White is not yet winning, but Roddy did not have enough time on the clock to solve all his problems.

32...♘f8

32...a4 33 ♖a1 a3 34 ♗c5! is why the knight went to c3 and not c5. 32...♘f4!? would have caused more turbulence psychologically, and was the move that bothered me at the time.

33 ♘a4 ♖a6 34 d7! *(D)*



Setting big practical problems.

34...♔g8??

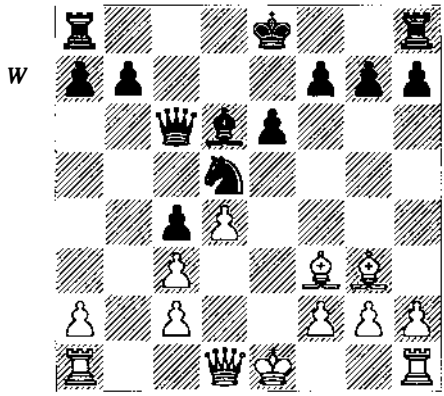
A losing blunder. Also bad is 34...♘xd7?, when 35 ♖d1 ♘b6 36 ♘c5! (36 ♘xb6 ♗xb6 37 ♖d6) 36...♖a8 37 ♘e6! is the most clinical punishment. However, Black is still in the game after 34...♘e6. Then after 35 ♖d1, 35...♘d4 36 ♖d2 ♖d6 37 f4 ♗f6 38 fxe5 ♗xe5 39 ♘c5 leads to a clear advantage for White, but Black can improve with 35...♔g6!, when 36 ♖d5 ♔f6 37 ♔f1 is only a slight edge to White.

35 ♖b8 1-0

Moves and Ideas

In the transcript of the ICC lesson in the last chapter, I made a passing reference to the importance of not confusing moves and ideas. This is a common error in chess, and one of the things that makes the game so difficult. You think about something conceptually and decide that it is not in your favour in general, but then things change slightly and suddenly, and in the slightly changed circumstances, it becomes good. We often fail to adjust because in the

process of rejecting a move, we wrongly throw out a whole idea. This recently happened, to my considerable relief, in one of my own games:



Rowson – Motwani
British Ch, Scarborough 2004

Paul offered a draw here, and it's a very reasonable offer because Black has no major problems and I was behind on the clock. However, I was somehow disappointed with the way the opening had gone and felt that I could play a few more moves without major risk. I also wanted to see where Paul would put his king. I should probably have taken the draw, unless I had a clear idea of how to improve my position, but instead I plodded on without any real ideas and put myself in danger.

18 ♖b1?

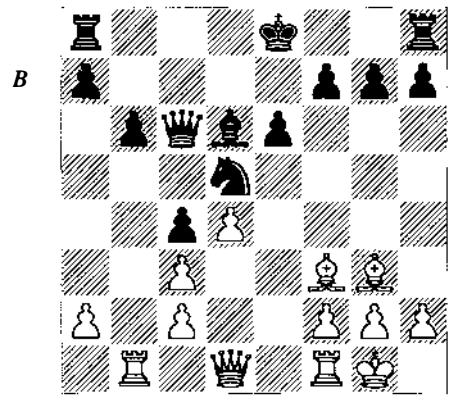
A few moves previously, it seemed likely that Black would castle queenside, and I think I hadn't fully shaken off this idea. I also felt that Black would generally play ...b5, to support his c-pawn. However, this is all way off the mark.

18 a4! 0-0 19 0-0 ♖fd8 20 ♕c1 might be slightly better for White on a good day because it's easier for me to try to do something on both sides of the board. However, neither side should lose unless they make a major error.

18...b6!

Paul already considered taking on g3, but of course it makes no sense to do so when the rook is on h1 – thus gifting White the open h-file. 18...b5 19 ♗xd5 ♕xd5 20 ♕f3 was one (somewhat dubious) idea that made me decide to play on. However, after 20...♕xf3 21 gxf3 ♔d7 22 ♖xb5 ♖hb8 23 ♖xb8 ♖xb8 24 ♔d2 White is slightly worse, in spite of being a pawn up.

19 0-0 *(D)*



Now Paul thought about taking on g3 again, but decided that he didn't like the look of fxg3, when I might make use of the open f-file.

19...0-0 20 ♖e1

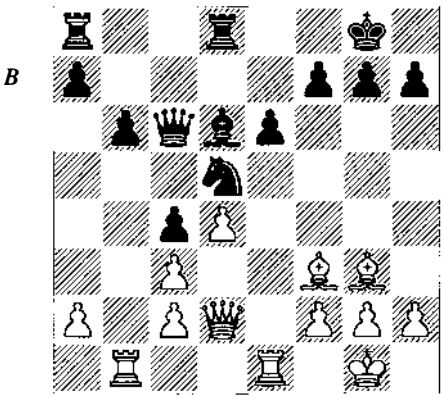
Once again Paul considered taking on g3, but didn't like the fact that it gave me a clear plan. I take with the h-pawn, and play g4, g3, ♔g2 and ♖h1. Also, Paul wanted to have the option of taking back on d5 with a piece if I ever played ♗xd5, so he wasn't ready to instigate anything with ...♕a4. This all seems reasonable, and at this point I would have been happy for him to take on g3 because it would give me a clear idea of what I should be playing for. In any case, I think Paul now decided that the idea of ...♗xg3 was not in his favour, which is not the case at all. In fact the *idea* is fine, he merely hasn't yet reached a position where it is a good *move*.

20...♖fd8

Now I realized that I couldn't really do anything to trouble Black and resigned myself to offering a draw. However, as often happens when we think of the pending offer more than the position, I accompanied the offer with an obtuse move.

21 ♕d2? *(D)*

21 ♗e4! would have been more purposeful, eyeing h7 and perhaps intending ♕f3, though I still prefer Black.



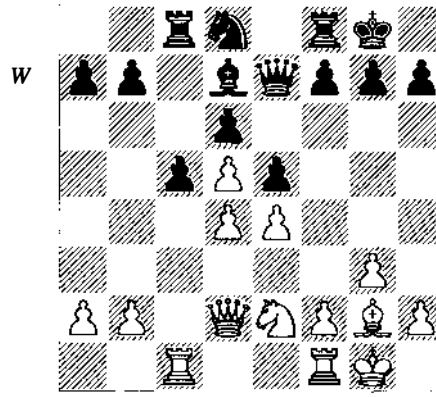
As Paul was thinking about the offer, it gradually dawned on me that I was significantly worse. I was fine a few moves ago, but my position hasn't really improved, while Black has made several constructive moves. Paul felt he might be better now too, but couldn't see a way to continue that he felt fully comfortable with, so in the end he accepted the offer.

a) 21...♗f8!? is possible, when the bishop is well placed to deal with any desperate attack on the kingside. However, psychologically it's hard to leave White with the two bishops and I might start to cause some trouble with 22 h4.

b) 21...♗xg3! was now the way to go! 22 hxg3 (22 fxg3 doesn't have much point now: it takes me a while to get organized on the f-file and Black can easily defend f7) 22...♕a4! (Black is already creating serious threats, so the idea of g4, g3, ♔g2 and ♖h1 is far too slow to be of any major relevance; Black is dictating events) 23 g4 ♕a3! (a key detail! Black cannot take on a2 without getting his queen trapped, but 23...♕a3 almost forces me to take on d5, thus clarifying Black's advantage) 24 ♗xd5 ♖xd5. There is no need for White to resign this position, and Black is not immediately threatening to win material, but I'm sure that if Paul had felt he could force this position he would not have accepted the offer of a draw. Black has a clear structural advantage and can try to tie White down to the defence of the queenside pawns followed by breaking with ...b5-b4 or ...e5, when his superior coordination might well be enough to win material.

½-½

Confusing moves and ideas is commonplace at almost every level of chess, but at lower levels I have noticed a related error that can be quite shocking at times. This is when a player thinks not of individual moves, White/Black White/Black, etc., but rather in chunks of moves White/White/White Black/Black/Black, with the two not really integrating. One way to describe this is to compare it to the difference between atoms (individual entities), and molecules (made of a few different atoms). Consider the following:



Vanheirzeele – Leenhouts
Bruges 2003

Black's last move was ...c7-c5, giving White the option of two different captures on the c-file. Daniel Vanheirzeele, playing White, now made a big mistake, squandering the bulk of his advantage, but he did for so highly instructive reasons.

15 dxc6?

I asked Daniel if he considered changing the structure by 15 dxc5! dxc5, but he said that he barely considered it. He saw that Black could play ...b6, ...♘b7 and ...♘d6, when he will have a nice position. Daniel is rated around 2250, but I consider him stronger than that. In any case, he plays at a level where this sort of mistaken reasoning should not occur.

He is right that *if* Black gets those *three*(!) moves in, then he will have a good position. But it is White's move! When I first saw 14...c5 my emotional reaction was that it was a mistake,

because it allowed a structure that would normally be in White's favour. I also felt that Black was temporarily disorganized and White should have a way to strike before Black can sort himself out. This is indeed the case after 16 ♕a5! a6 17 ♕b6!, when White retains the initiative and Black has no clear path to equality. The active approach doesn't seem to help: 17...♗b5 18 ♖fe1 f5 19 exf5 ♖f6 20 ♕a5 b6 21 ♕d2 and White keeps control.

15...♘xc6 16 d5?! ♘b8

White's advantage is largely superficial. He has more space, but Black doesn't have any real problems finding room for his pieces and White's minor pieces are not very impressive. White eventually won after further adventures.

'Control'

You may reasonably expect a man to walk a tightrope safely for ten minutes; it would be unreasonable to do so without accident for two hundred years.
BERTRAND RUSSELL (on the prospect of nuclear war)

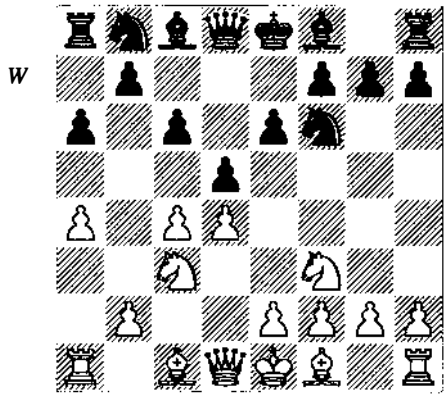
A further reason that chess is so hard is that it's difficult to keep control of a good position. If you are facing a tough defender, you have to play well for a series of moves just to keep your advantage, and missing one detail can be enough to turn the position completely. This difficulty of keeping control is illustrated in the following game.

Yermolinsky – Hodgson
North American Open, Las Vegas 1999

1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 a6!?

Korchnoi once remarked that this move wouldn't survive a world championship match, by which he probably means that White should be able to demonstrate a significant advantage after a certain amount of careful preparation. That may well be true, but the fact that Kasparov has played this line suggests that if there is some sort of refutation, it is still somewhat elusive.

5 a4 e6 *(D)*

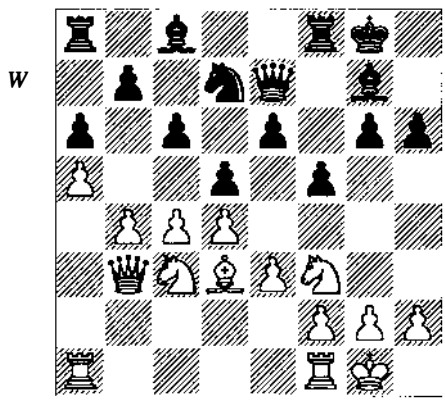


So now we have a Semi-Slav with a4 and ...a6 inserted. It's hard to say whom this favours – White sometimes has the option of binding Black's queenside with a5 but on the other hand the b4-square is weakened and if White ever captures on d5 and Black takes back with the e-pawn, White doesn't have the ready-made minority attack that he would normally have in such structures.

6 ♗g5 ♘bd7 7 a5 h6 8 ♗xf6 ♕xf6 9 e3 g6 10 ♗d3 ♗g7 11 0-0 0-0?!

Either here or on the last move 11...♕e7!? should probably be played, in order to make it more difficult for White to play b4. By allowing b4, Julian allows White a very definite edge.

12 b4! ♕e7 13 ♕b3 f5!? *(D)*



Black gains his share of space and now has a kind of Stonewall Dutch with decent dark-square

control. But what do we think about the bishop on c8? It would be too simplistic to call him 'bad' because he hasn't really had a chance yet to be good. The more important question to ask is whether he has a future, and the answer to that depends on the next five moves or so. He doesn't move in that time (there is no good reason for him to move) but other aspects of the position will be established, and this will give him an idea of what he needs to do to get involved.

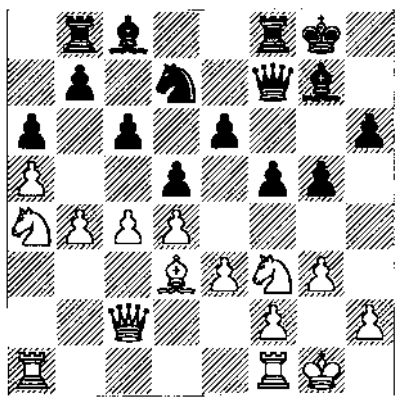
14 ♘a4 g5! 15 g3!?

White wants to meet ...g4 with ♘h4 but this move does 'open the box' and weakens White's light squares. This may not seem important now, but as we see elsewhere in the book, the problem with moving pawns in front of the king is often not revealed until much later in the game. Moreover, if possible, White would like to move the f3-knight to e5 so Yermolinsky should certainly have considered 15 ♘b6!? ♘xb6 16 axb6. Now Black seems to have some strategic problems and I'm not sure how easy they are to solve. The issue is not just the bishop on c8 but the strength of White's pawn on b6, which means that Black will always have to be ready for sacrifices on a6 or c6. After the plausible 16...f4 17 ♘e5 ♗xe5 18 dxe5 Black is in no immediate danger, but White has an enduring edge.

15...♕f7 16 ♕c2

16 ♗e2!? looks more flexible, and presents the option of ♘b2-d3, but Black is ready to stake his claim with 16...g4! 17 ♘h4 e5!, when the position is just a mess.

16...♖b8 *(D)*



One of those moves that you feel you want to play, even if you can't fully explain why. In this case White has to keep an eye on Black playing ...b6 and it's pleasant that the d7-knight can move without allowing ♘b6 with tempo. In this case it is a useful waiting move too, because by encouraging ♘c5 it allows Black to proceed with ...♕h5 and ...f4 – without ♘e5 (after ...♕h5, ♗e2) hitting the knight on d7.

17 ♘c5 ♘xc5 18 bxc5

If White's f2-pawn were on f4, Black would be strategically lost, but Julian doesn't allow White to take control so easily.

18...♕h5 19 ♗e2

19 ♘e5 ♗xe5 20 dxe5 f4 is not so clear because Black can follow up with ...♗d7-e8 and then either ...♕h3 and ...♗h5 or ...♔g7 and ...♗g6. Of course, he may not be given time to play all these moves, but when your position has 'perspective' in this way, it normally means that things are not so bad. I have noticed that players from the former Soviet Union use the word 'perspective' a lot when they are considering positions and in light of the importance placed on 'potential' in Chapter 13, I wonder if what they are getting at is something like 'potential'. I am not sure of the Russian idea they are trying to express, but whenever I have heard them use the term in English it is associated with 'things to look forward to' or 'capacity to improve the position' and this sounds a lot like Suba's 'potential' in Chapter 13.

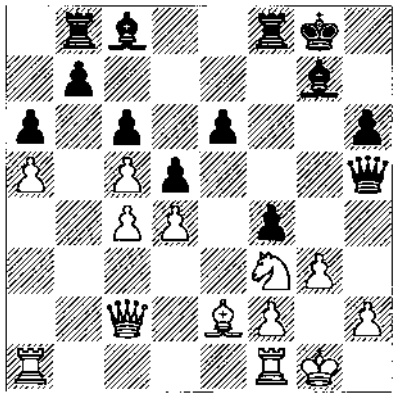
19...f4! 20 exf4

Seriously weakening d4, but giving White's rooks access to the e5- and e6-squares. Other moves don't look too good: 20 e4 g4 21 ♘h4 f3 22 ♗d3 ♗xd4 and 20 gxf4 gxf4 21 ♔h1 e5! are both fine for Black.

20...gxf4 *(D)*

21 ♘e5(?)

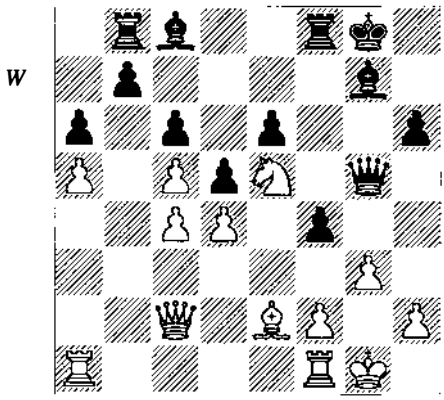
Yermo has played the first twenty moves better than his opponent, but here he begins to lose control. This move is clearly coming sooner or later, but it was worth waiting until there was more back-up. I suspect it was based on a miscalculation of what follows. For those who feel that Black's 'attack' on the kingside is quite plausible, ask yourself what you would play after 21 ♖ae1 !.



I am sure this doesn't apply to as strong a player as Yermolinsky, but I imagine some players might find this move difficult because they feel that the rook somehow belongs on b1. It is true that the b7-pawn is a good target for a rook to have, but there is more going on in the position and the priority here is to establish positional control.

When I first annotated this game, I wondered if the concept of 'control' is perhaps taken for granted by GMs in the sense that we know when we have it or don't have it, but it may not be at all obvious for some players who has 'control' of a position at a glance. I guess having control means that you don't have too much to worry about and that you are setting the agenda. It is a bit like having the 'initiative' but unlike the initiative it doesn't always involve 'doing something'. It is also a necessary condition for operating in 'plus-equals mode' that I mention in *7DCS* (Chapter 3). When you have control it is often enough just to keep playing good moves, relying on your longer-term positional assets. In this instance, neither side has control in the diagram position, but 21 ♖ael would have led to White taking control within a few moves. After 21 ♖ael, White is threatening ♘e5 followed by moving the e2-bishop to secure control of e5 (and to g4 if the queen goes to h3!). If White achieves those moves, then Black will be busted, but I can't find any adequate answer. 21...♕h3 looks like the only way to resist (21...dxc4 22 ♘e5 f3 23 ♘xf3! ♖xf3 24 ♕d1), but then White has 22 ♗d1! renewing the threat of ♘e5 while keeping an eye on the important steed on f3. Black seems to have big problems after this. 22...e5 23 cxd5 ♗f5 24 ♕c4 doesn't give any joy and after 22...fxg3 both recaptures are good but 23 fxg3 is the more dangerous for Black. In that case, even exchange sacrifices on f3 don't seem to work due to Black's lack of development so ♘e5 will follow, and the pressure on Black's position will keep growing.

21...♕g5 *(D)*



22 h4?

Continuing with a mistaken idea. It was not too late to go back and start again. After 22 ♘f3! Black has no better square than 22...♕h5, and now White should try 23 ♖ae1, when he has a significant advantage.

22...♕f5 23 ♕xf5

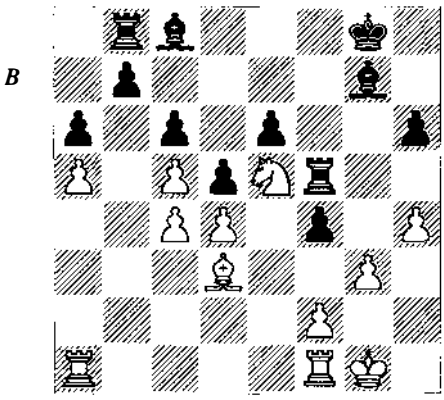
It is possible that Yermolinsky had intended something more forcing here but missed a detail in the following line: 23 ♗d3 ♕h3 24 ♗h7+ ♔h8 25 ♘g6+ ♔xh7 26 ♘xf8++ (26 ♘xf4+ ♕f5) 26...♔g8 27 ♘g6 fxg3 28 ♘e7+ ♔f8 29 fxg3+ ♔xe7 30 ♕c3 and Black is better.

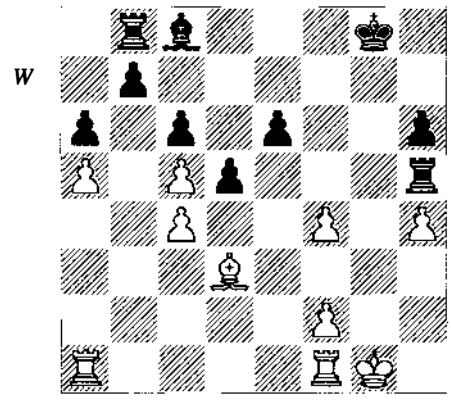
23...♖xf5

Black is actually much better already, though this doesn't become clear for a few moves, and I imagine at this stage the players were emerging from their narrative of 'White squeezing, Black wriggling'. In any case, White doesn't have a secure hold on the dark squares, and h4 has weakened the kingside, so it's no surprise that Black's position comes to life.

24 ♗d3 *(D)*

24...♗xe5!





24...♖xe5 25 dxe5 ♗xe5 is the more straightforward way to sacrifice the exchange, but it's much less effective than the game. However, it's quite instructive that even here Black doesn't seem to have problems. 26 ♖a4 fxg3 27 cxd5 gxf2+ 28 ♖xf2 exd5 29 ♖e2 ♗c3 30 ♖f4 ♗d7 31 ♖g2+ ♗g7 looks good for White, but I am not so sure he can increase the pressure and if Black manages to activate his rook and king and play ...♗c8 (admittedly quite a big 'if') then White will be in trouble. For those interested in such positions, I recommend taking a look at Van Wely-Adams, Calvia Olympiad 2004. Van Wely had rook and bishop against two bishops and couldn't make anything of it.

25 dxe5

25 ♗xf5 ♗xd4 is completely winning for Black, but only because of the tactic based on a simple double threat: to take on g3 and f5. Chess is often decided by small details. If it weren't for this tactic, the position probably be OK for White (it looks like it might even be better for White, but I think this is illusory).

25...♖xe5 26 gxf4 ♖h5 *(D)*

The position has stabilized and Black has emerged with a clear advantage, in spite of the fact that his b8-rook and c8-bishop have done almost nothing!

27 ♖fe1 ♔f7!

Correct use of the king is the hallmark of good endgame play. It sounds a bit glib to say that here, but I remember showing Yusupov a game I had lost due to a failure to make use of my king in time. As if to defend myself I said: "Of course I know that I need to activate my king in the endgame", to which he replied, with a smile, "You may know it, but sometimes it's not enough to 'know' it – it has to be *in the blood*."

28 ♖e5 ♖xh4 29 cxd5 cxd5 30 ♖b1 ♗d7!

Better late than never!

31 ♖b4

31 ♗xa6 is met by 31...♖g8+. It is painful when a position turns, but especially so when even your most basic tricks are not working.

31...♗c6

A good square for the bishop: securely anchored by the b7-pawn and ready to enter the fray after a timely ...d4.

32 ♔f1 ♖g8

White's dark-square bind is gone. None of Black's pieces are restricted and all of White's pawns are weak.

33 ♔e2 ♖gg4 34 ♔e3 ♖h3+ 35 ♔e2 ♖hh4 36 ♔e3 ♖g1 37 ♖b6 d4+! 38 ♔xd4 ♖xf4+ 39 ♔e3 ♖a4 40 f4 ♖g3+ 0-1

Finding Beauty in Ugly Moves

If order appeals to the intellect, then disorder appeals to the imagination.
PAUL CLAUDEL

So far we have considered many different aspects of chess that make it a difficult game, but I would like to add one more: aesthetics. We often reject moves because they don't look right, or they look ugly in some way that we can't

fully explain. However, chess beauty lies under the surface of appearances, and to make full use of our resources we need to be able to find the hidden beauty in moves that seem to be ugly on the surface.

There was no lack of ugly moves in the following game, but in all cases there was an underlying idea that contained beauty for the discerning person. In any case, when I started to analyse this game I sent a text message to Luke, the victor, to tell him that the whole game was so ugly that it made me feel sick. He sympathized, and texted back a very cultured answer: "Yes, it's a bit of a Jackson Pollock, isn't it?". For those who don't know, Jackson Pollock is famous, or perhaps notorious, for an unorthodox style of painting which gave rise to works of art that look, to the uninitiated, like random splashes of paint thrown against a wall. However, Pollock was influenced by Surrealist ideas of 'psychic automatism' (direct expression of the unconscious) and commented on his own work as follows: "When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well."

The following 'Jackson Pollock' came out well for White, but it could easily have been different. Luke managed to find harmony in a string of discordant-looking moves, and applied enough aesthetic and psychological pressure that his opponent eventually overlooked a pivotal tactical detail.

McShane – Kotronias
Gibraltar 2003

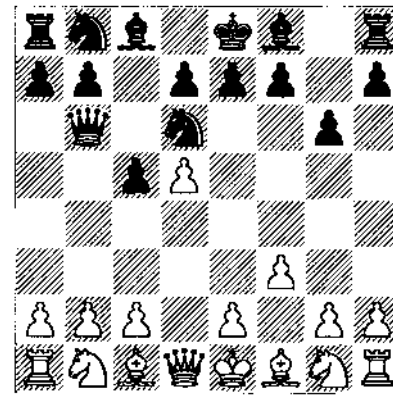
1 d4 ♘f6 2 ♗g5 ♘e4

2...e6 has always been my favoured move here. If White wants to retain the initiative, he really has to play 3 e4 h6 4 ♗xf6 ♕xf6, but here I prefer Black's position. This is largely a question of taste, and it is not easy to deal with White's centre, but I feel that Black has a slight material advantage here and that White's temporary opportunities don't fully compensate for this.

3 ♗f4 c5 4 d5 ♕b6 5 ♗c1!

The third move of the bishop, but probably best.

5...g6 6 f3 ♘d6 *(D)*



7 e4

This is clearly the most aggressive move, but White might have more chances for an advantage with the modest 7 ♘c3 ♗g7 8 e3!?. The following moves are not forced but after 8...0-0 9 ♘h3 ♕c7 10 a4 b6 11 ♘f2 f5 12 ♗e2 e5 13 e4 f4 14 a5 ♗a6 15 0-0 ♕b7 a draw was agreed in Hodgson-Turner, Oxford 1998. I remember Julian said he accepted the draw offer because he didn't see a plan for White, but in the post-mortem Matthew suggested 16 g3!?, after which the position definitely seems more comfortable for White.

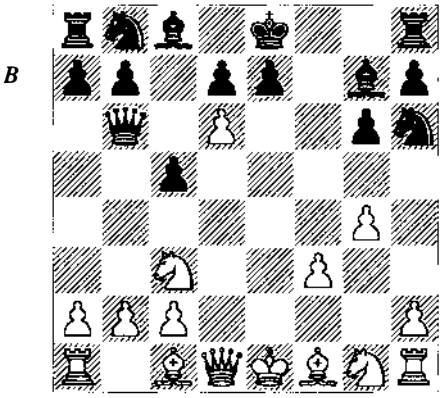
7...♗g7 8 ♘c3 f5 9 exf5 ♘xf5 10 g4

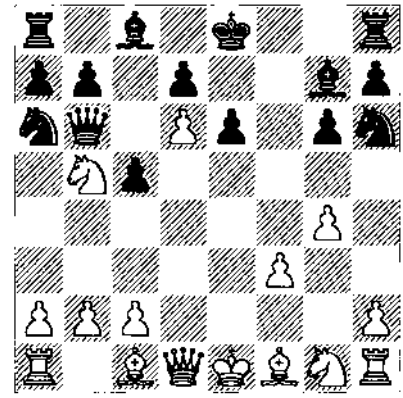
Although very damaging in quality terms, this thrust gains important information about the knight on f5, and forms part of White's idea of advancing his h-pawn to attack Black's vulnerable g6/h7 complex.

10...♘h6

Perhaps the most solid option. 10...♘d4 is the most obvious move, but then White plays 11 ♘e4! and the threat of c3 causes problems. 10...♘d6 is also possible, when White should again try 11 h4!? (Wells).

11 d6! *(D)*





Excellent! White is almost completely undeveloped but he takes the chance to play this disruptive move while he has the opportunity (time). Black's reply is almost forced due to the threat of ♘d5 and thus White gains quite a lot in quality, because the d6-pawn becomes very strong and hinders the development of the c8-bishop.

11...e6

Luke gave 11...♕xd6!? 12 ♕xd6 exd6 in his post-game notes, continuing 13 ♘d5, which is quite a picture! Black cannot avoid material loss. I suspect Kotronias stopped at that, but I think it is good for your chess to go beyond the visual impression and check if the assessment is really convincing. Black is certainly not lost after 13...♘a6 14 ♗xa6 bxa6 15 ♘c7+ ♔d8 16 ♘xa8 ♗b7. White is better here, but all results are possible because the compensation is not negligible: two bishops, pawn, weak f3-pawn (this is the key – with the pawn on g2 this line would be unthinkable – that is an example of how 'quality' manifests itself in complicated variations) and development advantage.

However, this is not theoretically important because 13 ♘b5! ♘a6 14 ♘xd6+ ♔e7 15 ♘xc8+ ♖axc8 16 ♗g5+ ♔e6 17 0-0-0 looks like a comfortable advantage to White.

12 ♘b5 ♘a6 *(D)*

13 ♗f4!?

The product of almost half an hour's thought. There is something very ugly about this move – the bishop is unprotected on f4 and stands in front of a sickly f3-pawn that would like to have had the prospect of advancing. However, the position is highly irregular and it's difficult to know what either side should do.

a) Trying to implement the same idea that occurred in the game by 13 ♗xh6 ♗xh6 14 c4 is not too attractive because 14...♕a5+ is annoying for White.

b) 13 c4 ♘f7 looks relatively safe for Black.

c) 13 ♗c4 0-0 14 h4 looks reasonable to me, but there is a danger that Black might one day take the d6-pawn with a knight on f7, and gain a tempo on the c4-bishop.

d) 13 ♗e3!? was accompanied by a draw offer in Hodgson-Nunn, Oxford 1998. It is understandable that both players felt scared to continue.

e) In his seductive book on the Trompowsky, Peter Wells suggests 13 h4 as the best move here. Luke may have been afraid of 13...c4!?. Pete suggests White can meet this with 14 ♗xh6 ♗xh6 15 ♕d4 but after 15...♕xd4 16 ♘xd4 c3! I am almost certain that Black is better in the ending after, e.g., 17 bxc3 b6!. If instead White tries 14 ♗xc4, Black has 14...♘xg4!, when best play seems to be 15 fxg4 ♕c6 16 ♖h3 ♕xc4 17 ♕e2 and this ending is harder to judge because the material is equal, but White doesn't have any major weaknesses.

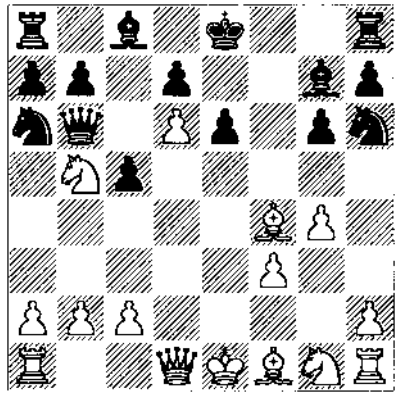
We now return to 13 ♗f4!? *(D)*:

13...♕c6!?

This move doesn't feel right to me, but it does almost force the following exchange, which looks, on the face of it, to favour Black.

13...0-0 14 ♕d2 ♘xg4 (14...♘f7!? is also possible, with unclear consequences) 15 fxg4 ♕c6 16 0-0-0 g5! 17 ♕e2 (17 ♗xg5 ♕xh1 is

B



also unclear; there are far too many imbalances to make a definitive assessment without reams of concrete analysis) 17...♖xf4 18 ♗g2 ♗xb2+! 19 ♔b1 ♕b6 20 c4 with a mess. My best guess at what should be happening lies in the line 20...♗d4 (20...♗g7 21 ♘h3 ♖f8 {21...♖d4 seems wrong in principle: the rook is needed for defence and shouldn't be too readily exchanged} 22 ♘xg5 h6 23 ♘e4 ♘b4 24 g5 hxg5 25 ♖df1 and Black's king will be decisively outnumbered) 21 ♘h3 ♘c7 22 dxc7 a6 23 ♘xf4 gxf4 (23...axb5 24 ♘d5!) 24 ♖xd4 cxd4 25 ♕e5 axb5 and White makes a draw by perpetual check.

In light of the general mayhem, I would be very tempted to play 13...c4!? if I were Black. On c5 the pawn seriously restricts two pieces and makes it easier for White's king to remain in the centre of the board, so Black might be better off without it.

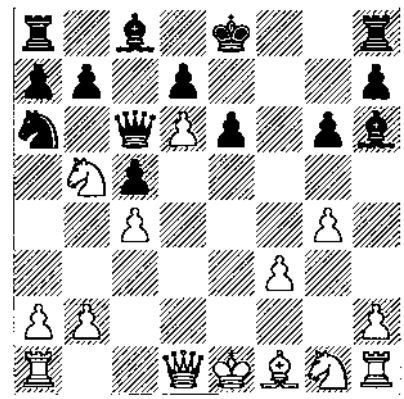
14 ♗xh6!?

Extraordinary! A moment before Luke moved this bishop to f4, so what has the last move changed? The main difference I can see is that after the follow-up in the game, Black would have had the option of ...♕a5+, but the main reason, I suspect, is that Luke didn't see another adequate defence to ...♘xg4. This is another illustration of 'planning in pencil and playing in pen' – Luke adapts his plans as the position changes.

14 ♕e2!? looks reasonable, because after 14...♘xg4 15 ♗g2 ♘f6 16 ♗e5 White has gained a lot of tempi in return for the g-pawn. However, 14...♗xb2! is a safer pawn to grab, and after 15 ♖b1 ♗g7 White has no compelling way to continue; e.g., 16 ♗e5 ♗xe5 17 ♕xe5 0-0 and Black seems to be safe.

14...♗xh6 15 c4! *(D)*

B



This move is extremely ugly, especially after giving away the dark-squared bishop, but all the same it makes a lot of sense. Although 15 c4 seems to weaken the dark squares, in some ways it protects them because it prevents ...c4. Moreover it is now extremely difficult to get the a6-knight into play, and also difficult to activate the c8-bishop and a8-rook.

15...0-0!?

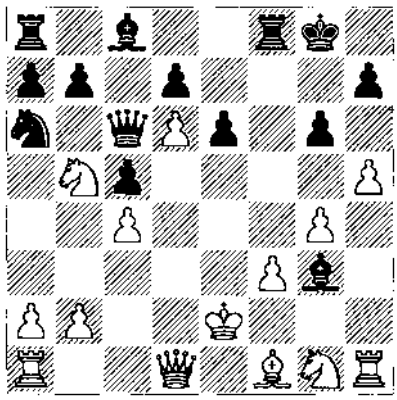
This looks perfectly sensible, but it gives White a direct object of attack. Given that White's play was so eccentric and that he eventually won, there is a temptation to assume that it all deserved to fit together perfectly. However, although I remain awe-struck by Luke's play in this game, I suspect that his position was actually worse for most of it. On the other hand, as I pointed out in *7DCS* we need to think of positions not so much objectively, because that is never fully possible, but rather from the 'intersubjective' perspective where we consider the strength of moves relative to their impact on the position and on the opponent. In this sense White's moves are very strong, and they proved to be too much for Kotronias in the end. This game is an excellent antidote to the tendency to 'analyse by result' and assume that all of White's moves were deep and brilliant when in fact Luke was probably making it up as he went along.

15...b6 might seem to be better, but Black can't put off castling forever. 16 ♗d3 ♗b7 17 ♗e4 ♕c8 (17...♕xe4+ 18 fxe4 ♗xe4 looks like the sort of craziness that typifies this game, but it doesn't work: 19 ♘f3 0-0 20 0-0 ♘b4 looks a bit scary, but the fact that Black has only one piece for the queen means we don't have to take this very seriously) 18 ♕e2 0-0 (18...♗xe4 19 ♕xe4 ♕c6!?) 19 h4 ♗f4 20 h5 and all bets are off.

16 h4! ♗f4

16...b6!?.

17 h5 ♗g3+ 18 ♔e2 *(D)*



What I love about this game is Luke's disregard for appearances. If I were looking at this game casually, I would probably guess that White was either a computer, or a happy-go-lucky punter. At his best, as he seemed to be in this game, Luke is an unusual combination of the two.

18...♘b4?!

18...g5!? looks safer. Then White would probably try to keep things destabilized with 19 h6!. I think I prefer Black's position here in theory, but White's position seems the easier to play.

I think the text-move is an error, but perhaps not a decisive one. The idea of ...♘b4-d5 is clearly attractive but Luke managed to avoid it:

19 hxg6 h6?!

Quite a clever attempt to plug some dark squares and make ...♖xf3 happen, but Luke found a flaw.

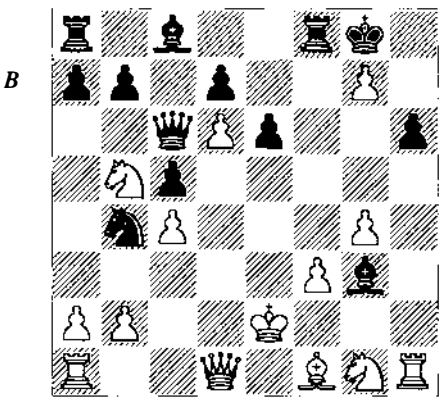
Black should play 19...hxg6 20 ♖h3 ♗f4 21 ♕e1 ♗g5! – a difficult move to see, because the bishop seems so provisional on this square (21...g5 22 ♕b1! is easier to see, but not in any way tempting for Black). For several moves there has been the prospect of ♘h3 and the bishop seems to invite this (but the rook occupies h3!) and the bishop being on g5 merely stops ♕h4, nothing else. This is enough, however, to force White to come up with a new idea.

20 g7! *(D)*

I like the fact that White avoids ...♖xf3 by attacking the rook!

20 ♕d2? ♖xf3! 21 ♘xf3 ♕e4+ 22 ♕e3 ♕xc4+ 23 ♔d1 ♕c2#.

20 ♖xh6? ♖xf3! 21 ♘xf3 ♕e4+ 22 ♔d2 ♗f4+ 23 ♔c3 ♕e3+ 24 ♗d3 ♗xh6 is fine for Black: 25 ♘e1 a6 26 ♘a3 (26 ♘c7 b5! works out well for Black: 27 ♘xa8 ♗g7+ 28 ♔b3 bxc4+ with a winning attack) 26...b5 27 ♕e2 and all results are still possible, but Black's bishops are about to team up and I fear for White's king.



20...♔xg7?

"Wrong because White's queen gets to c3 with tempo" was Luke's post-game note, but at this point it's not totally clear why the c3-square is so prized.

20...♖f7! 21 a3!? (the best move; 21 ♖xh6 ♖xf3! is nasty, 21 ♕b1 ♖xg7 looks safe for Black, and 21 ♕d2 ♖xf3! is decisive) 21...♘d5! 22 ♕d2 ♗f4 23 ♕d3 a6 24 cxd5 ♕xb5 25 ♕xb5 axb5 26 dxe6 dxe6 with an unclear ending, according to Luke.

21 ♕d2!

Gaining a tempo by attacking h6.

21...♗f4?

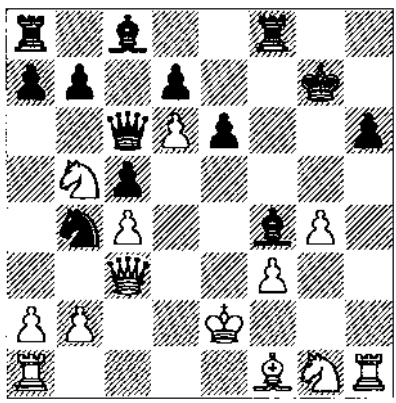
A natural reaction, bring the bishop closer to 'home'. However, after this it's hard to see a defence against White's looming attack. After 21...♖f6 22 ♘c7! the fact that this wayward knight takes part in the kingside attack is great entertainment but Luke simply mentions the move in his post-game notes, with the implication that it is good. In fact the position remains unclear. 22...♔f7 and now:

a) My impression is that 23 ♖xh6 is the safest and probably best path for White, even though after 23...♖xh6 24 ♕xh6 ♕xd6 he has to force a draw. There are two alternatives:

b) 23 ♕c3!? is given by Fritz, and I assume the idea is to insist on playing ♘e8 but the position remains unclear after 23...♕xd6 24 ♘xa8 ♗e5! 25 ♕b3 ♕b8.

c) 23 ♘xa8 ♖xf3! 24 ♘xf3 ♕e4+ 25 ♔d1 (25 ♕e3? ♕xc4+ 26 ♔d2 ♕c2#) 25...♕xf3+ 26 ♕e2 ♕xh1 27 ♘c7 b6 and Black is not worse.

22 ♕c3+ *(D)*



22...♔g8

22...♖f6 23 ♘c7! e5 24 ♘e8+ ♔f7 25 ♘xf6 ♔xf6 26 ♘h3 is winning for White.

After 22...e5!?, 23 ♖h5! appears to keep some pressure on. The threat of taking on e5 is difficult to deal with; e.g., 23...a6? 24 ♘c7 ♖b8 25 ♖xe5 and White wins. Black can try 23...♘d5!? but White still seems to be better after 24 cxd5 ♕xb5+ 25 ♔f2 ♕b6 (25...♕b4 26 ♕xb4 cxb4 27 ♘h3 e4!? is also possible, but White has many promising options, including the simple 28 ♘xf4 ♖xf4 29 ♗e2) 26 ♘h3 ♕xd6 27 ♘xf4 ♖xf4 28 ♖e1.

23 a3!

A major concession, based on a detail that Kotronias had missed. It turns out that this detail decided the game: 23...♘d5? 24 ♕d3! not only targets g6, but also indirectly defends b5.

24 ♕d3 ♔g7

Now Luke has a serious initiative and he uses it very powerfully.

25 ♘h3

Getting the knight out(!).

25...♗e5 26 ♗g2

Black is now hopelessly behind in development. Kotronias desperately tries to catch up but is too late.

26...b6 27 ♖hg1!?

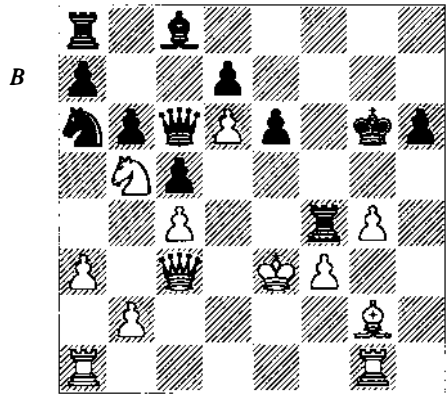
An interesting practical decision.

27 ♖ag1 looks like it makes better use of the pieces, but after 27...♗b7 28 f4 ♕xg2+ 29 ♖xg2 ♗xg2 it might have seemed to Luke, from a distance, that Black was causing some trouble. In fact, 30 ♖g1 is winning quite comfortably.

27...♗f4 28 ♕c3+ ♔g6

28...♔g8 29 ♘xf4 ♖xf4 30 ♔e3! e5 31 ♕xe5 ♖xc4 32 f4 ♕xb5 33 ♗d5+.

29 ♘xf4+ ♖xf4 30 ♔e3!



What can you say? It's the best move.

30...e5 31 ♕xe5 ♖xc4 32 ♖h1 1-0

Black's kingside has been stripped bare and this quiet move, threatening ♖xh6+, signals the end. The finish would be 32...♕xb5 33

♖xh6+ ♔xh6 34 ♕f6+ ♔h7 35 ♖h1+ ♔g8 36 ♖h8#.

Sensational chess, and a great creative achievement by both players, but especially by Luke.

Learning from Proteus

So where does that leave us? Chess is still hard, and most of the time it leaves us feeling mildly confused. It is hard because of the exponential problem, and the fact that the concepts we use to make sense of the game rarely capture the truth of a position with precision. Chess is also hard because we have to think of so many different things at once, and therefore frequently feel burdened by cognitive load. It is also hard because it is so easy to confuse moves with ideas, to play purposefully without becoming too attached to a plan, to keep control of the game, and to suspend our aesthetic judgement about moves and positions.

As I've said before, I cannot really make chess any less demanding, but I do enjoy offering fresh perspectives in an attempt to assuage the difficulty. In this respect I would like to introduce *Proteus*, a Greek sea god. He could change his shape at will and was almost impossible to catch. Proteus may be a mythological character, but the word *Protean* is derived from his name, and to be protean is to be versatile, mutable, and capable of assuming many forms.

Good chess-players are protean in that they can move from one psychological 'shape' to another at will. At one moment they will be calculating a concrete line, and then in the next they might be assessing the intricacies of an ending. They will allow damage to their own structure one minute, and damage their opponent's the next. They will show the power of the two bishops in one game, but willingly play against the bishops in the next. They will think of their own ideas, and those of the opponent. They will duck and dive, wriggle and probe. They see far ahead and they are not easily caught. If you want to thrive amidst the difficulty of chess, you also need to be able to change your shape. So the next time you feel stuck by the difficulty of chess, think of Proteus, change your 'shape', and look at the position in a new way.

7 Something that Works for Me

If you are not confused, you are just not thinking clearly
TOM PETERS

A few months ago I was watching the post-mortem of a game in the French League between world-class grandmaster Francisco Vallejo Pons ('Paco') and my former team-mate, IM Geert van der Stricht. Paco won the game quite easily, mainly because Geert rejected a resource that would have involved seriously compromising his structure, in return for a lot of active piece-play. Paco felt the line was murky and by far Geert's best chance, but Geert felt extremely uncomfortable about weakening his pawn-structure and kept repeating: "But my pawn-structure! I couldn't do that to my pawn-structure!" Paco listened to this plea a few times in silence but eventually remarked, "You shouldn't worry so much about your pawns. They will be perfectly straight again in the next game."

Chess often makes us laugh, and most of the time we are laughing at the gap between our idea of how chess should be and how it actually is. I found this remark particularly funny, perhaps because it contained an important point about the different levels on which we can appreciate the importance of pawn-structure. Sometimes pawn-structure can decide the game, but sometimes it is completely irrelevant. Therefore we should keep an eye on our pawns, and those of our opponents, but we also need to get things in perspective. This applies not only to pawn-structure, but to the whole gamut of chess concepts and categories.

What I have tried to do in what follows is introduce the main set of conceptual tools that I use to get through 'the exponential jungle' that we considered in the previous chapter. I should stress at the outset that the model is not supposed to be prescriptive, and is by no means flawless. It is a descriptive model of the different components of a chess game and I present it here because it works for me. I rarely think of it explicitly during play, but it does help me to evaluate complex positions sometimes, and it has also improved my clock handling. Moreover, it often helps me to make sense of my games after they have been played, and can also give me some insight into the problems of my students.

One of my proof-readers remarked that it was a pity I didn't use the model more during play, because he was more interested in improving his play during the game than in post-game analysis. I imagine many readers will have a similar reaction so it's worth explaining how this works. Post-game analysis need not just be an academic exercise in seeing how the game could have or should have developed. It is also a way of facing up to how you habitually consider a position during play, and comparing that to the much wider range of possibilities in the position.

Models such as the one presented in this chapter are useful for 'unlearning' (Chapter 1) and for recalibrating the concepts you are unconsciously applying during play. By considering how the given model applies to positions away from the board I hope you will gradually break down unhelpful assumptions and see resources in positions that previous blocks might not have allowed you to see. Then when you return to play your next game, your repertoire of ideas will be wider and in this sense it can be very relevant to improving your play.

However, thinking of such models explicitly while your clock is ticking will generally do more harm than good. Anything other than the images of moves and variations is likely to be unhelpful 'noise' in your head that will lead you to create narratives (Chapter 3) based on applying the model to the position. This awkward

predicament leads you to try to fit the position to what is in your head, rather than allowing you to concentrate on the position and enjoy the experience of playing. I am not pretending that we can make a seamless distinction between what we do away from the board, and how we think while we are playing, but I do want to emphasize that you will gain more from the material in this chapter if you allow it to 'seep in' subtly and quietly, rather than using it as some kind of checklist during your games.

As I outlined in *7DCS*, Kasparov thinks of chess as a game of three dimensions: Material (value of the pieces), Quality (positional features like structure, king safety, etc.) and Time (initiative, capacity to do what is important). In *7DCS* I suggested that we should pay more attention to Kasparov's idea, but proposed that a fourth dimension should be added, namely 'Ticking' (clock time). Since writing *7DCS* I have given the matter some further thought and would now express things differently. I still believe that this is the kind of foundational thinking that chess-players need to avoid circling around the same old ideas, but I don't think Kasparov's model captures chess as well as I used to think it did.

This became clear to me on reading Robert Hübner's review of Kasparov's first Predecessor book in 'Buchbesprechung' (CBM, 2003). Hübner argues, convincingly, that Kasparov's triadic conception is incoherent because the three different dimensions collapse into each other: 'Time' and 'Material' are relevant only in so far as they are 'Quality'. Hübner expresses this by saying that time is a dynamic factor, while material is a static one, but the only way the importance of these dynamic and static features can be assessed is by their relevance to quality, and then they cease to operate as distinct dimensions.

This is an abbreviated version of the whole argument, which makes an even more convincing impression. Time is sometimes absolutely vital, and a single tempo can make a decisive difference, but sometimes Time is completely irrelevant, and having lots of extra tempi doesn't matter at all. So 'time' doesn't exist on the chessboard in any unitary way, because the value of one move varies enormously.

Likewise with material, it seems meaningless to speak of a 'material advantage' when the material you have is ineffectual and can do nothing to stop an impending checkmate. And if you reach a position in which White's two bishops are more effective than Black's rook and knight, what can we say: that White is material down, but he is ahead on quality? Or time? We could try, but only with a certain strain.

In Hübner's own words: "What is called 'space' and 'time' in chess does not describe forces but possibilities to deploy the forces – in a fairly general way. If the words are not connected with a specific position and with a view on the goal to be reached, they remain void. The chess-player does not use them as elements of his calculations; they only serve him to describe the situation (...) The notion 'material' is introduced for different purposes. It is used to make up the count of the latent forces on the board (...)

"The significance of these expressions for the description of chess structures has been overestimated because they can be applied in every situation..." (CBM)

My interpretation of this is that the idea of having a 'space advantage' or 'advantage in time' (not clock time but in terms of tempi) is misleading. What Hübner is suggesting is that you may have an advantage because you are capable of achieving a particular goal (like winning an important pawn or exchanging a set of pieces) and certain factors may help you achieve that (your opponent's lack of space makes it difficult to resist, or you are too far ahead in development) but the notions of time and space are just there to describe what is happening – they are words used to make sense of moves after the fact, rather than to decide upon moves during the game.

The implication is that my elaboration of Kasparov's idea in *7DCS* is also inexact. Hübner's own view of how the features of chess might be characterized is much tighter analytically, but this precision comes at the cost of being rather abstract. Essentially, Hübner thinks

of chess as being a battle between 'forces'. Those forces compete to achieve certain goals (exchanges, possession of open file, etc.) with certain 'structures' (of which there are sub-structures; pawn-structure, piece coordination, key squares, etc.).

The virtue of Hübner's approach is that it is precise, but personally I find it too abstract as a means of helping us to break our existing patterns of thought, in which material currently dominates.

Hübner seems to see the problem of materialism in chess, and believes it arises for three main reasons:

1) Games often develop in such a way that the first visible fruit of an advantage is a material advantage.

2) Whenever a position is assessed from a material point of view we don't add 'ceteris paribus' (all other things being equal) so when we say 'White is a pawn up' we associate extra material with advantageous positions, even though being a pawn up is not an advantage in itself – it depends on the pawn's role in the battle between the forces.

3) The evaluation scale used by chess programs is represented in numerical units, and we associate these with material units (1.0 equals one pawn, etc.) but in fact the units represent 'units of force' or 'quality' (Kasparov).

This strikes me as a cogent diagnosis, but as I said, I don't think any 'prescription' is offered, so where do we go from here? The best way to combat our materialist tendencies is probably just repeated exposure to examples where material was trumped by other factors. Most strong GMs see lines where material is sacrificed fairly effortlessly, but they haven't done this at every stage of their career and it seems to be just another component of chess skill that is hard-earned and a function of experience and open-mindedness.

However, I feel reluctant to let the idea of chess as a multi-dimensional game go, because I think it has considerable pedagogical weight that is not easy to replace with other models. Of course, there is no access to chess 'as it is' and all we can do is make up theories about it. Some theories are better than others and the 'better' I am most interested in is one that will help me to play good moves, rather than the one that is philosophically the most coherent or linguistically the most exact.

The Four Dimensions *Redux*

Before I go on, please understand that the idea of chess being a game of four dimensions is just a model. It does not perfectly capture the nature of chess. It has imperfections and is neither exhaustive nor exclusive. With this firmly in mind, I present a revised account of the four dimensions of chess, which is mindful of Hübner's critique, but does not pretend to answer it fully. It is a flawed model, but only in the sense that almost any model of chess that tries to help players improve will be flawed in some way. My four-dimensional account is still based on Kasparov's insight, and is similar to the model I presented in *7DCS*. Material is still Material, and Quality is still Quality, but I have changed Kasparov's 'Time' to 'Opportunity' and my slightly awkward word 'Ticking' becomes 'Time' which captures minutes and seconds in a much more straightforward way.

I suggest that thinking of chess as a game of four dimensions is helpful for most players because it widens their positional and practical horizons and enriches their capacity to evaluate chess ideas. I feel that I grew a lot as a player from reflecting on Kasparov's idea, and giving it my own twist. I have also noticed that students of varying strengths seem to find it useful as a way of describing positions more fully. The four dimensions are Material, Opportunity, Time and Quality, and we shall consider them in turn.[12]

Material

Clearly numbers can't tell us what to think, but thinking clearly without them is just about impossible
JOEL BEST (BBC Radio 4)

The point system of pawn = 1, rook = 5, etc., is a troublesome creature. It is crude, riddled with

exceptions, and out of date, but without it we would hardly know how to think about chess at all. It seems to me that what is needed is not to kill this point system, but to tame it, and give it a role in our thinking that is more constructive and less tyrannical. We need to be able to think *with* it, but not *through* it. We need to be able to look at a position *and* consider the material balance, not consider the position *by* looking at the material balance.

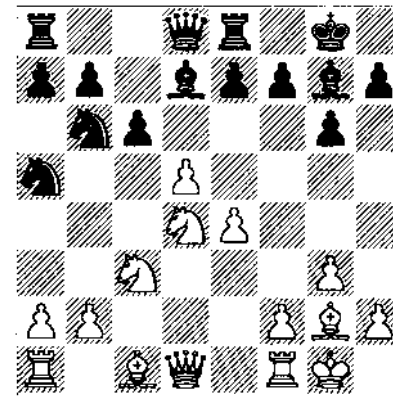
I have already considered this issue in some depth in *7DCS* so don't want to labour this point here. However, I do want to add that since writing *7DCS* it has become abundantly clear to me that 'materialism'
tional master level. Indeed, I have the impression that I win most of my games against IMs primarily because they don't make use of resources that involve the sacrifice of material. It is not so hard to see immediate possibilities based on giving up material, but it is extremely difficult for most players, for example, not to think of the loss of the exchange as decisive. In my experience most GMs now think of exchange sacrifices as mainstream – no more exciting than exchanging bishop for knight, but this hasn't yet trickled down into other levels of the game.

It is not really feasible to stop thinking of chess in material terms, but perhaps it is possible to move away from thinking of material exclusively in terms of points. Instead I think of the concept of 'material'
tive value of pawns, knights, bishops, rooks, queens and kings. These have no fixed value, and vary in strength depending on their relevance and scope in any given position. What we need to understand is not the static value of these pieces but their manifold roles and which of those roles are most salient in any given position. So for instance, I think of having an effective bishop-pair as a kind of material advantage, even though it is normally thought of as a positional advantage. Beyond this appraisal of roles, values can be stated only minimally. The relevant skill in assessing the material dimension is not counting on the basis of arbitrary material numbers but looking at the roles of the pieces and thinking carefully about whether a material advantage is latently relevant, already manifest as quality, or irrelevant in that particular position, perhaps due to the Opportunity or Time situation.

The following game should hopefully help to illustrate these points:

Aronian – Rowson
French League 2005

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘f3 ♗g7 4 g3 d5 5 cxd5 ♘xd5 6 ♗g2 ♘b6 7 ♘c3 ♘c6 8 e3 0-0 9 0-0 ♖e8 10 d5 ♘a5 11 ♘d4 ♗d7 12 e4 c6 *(D)*



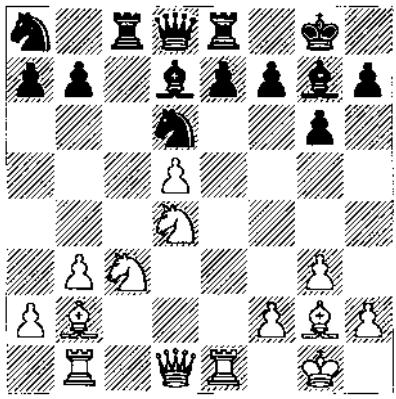
13 ♖b1

Lev played this move with a certain flourish, as if to emphasize that it was important. Alas, at this point the importance was lost on me. After the game, Lev pointed out that after the more conventional 13 ♖e1 cxd5 14 exd5 ♘bc4 15 b3, 15...e5!? gives Black a comfortable game. I used this knowledge a few weeks later to make a comfortable draw with Peter Heine Nielsen (I had previously tried 15...♕b6 16 ♘de2 ♘e5 with the idea of ...♕a6 and ...♘d3, but the plan didn't work out well in Stefansson-Rowson, Calvia OL 2004).

13 ♗f4 is the other main line, but now 13...♗c8! is a remarkable idea by Nakamura. Black threatens ...e5 and White has no convenient way to stop it.

13...♖c8 14 ♖e1 cxd5 15 exd5 ♘ac4 16 b3 ♘d6 17 ♗b2 ♘a8! *(D)*

A well-known manoeuvre in these positions. The idea is to activate the queen on b6 or a5,



connect the rooks, and then bring the knight back into the fray on c7 or b6.

18 a4?!

An impulsive move. The body language of my opponent suggested that he was trying to punish me, though at this stage I didn't understand what crime I had committed. Later he explained that he wanted to punish me for wilfully going down a line that is thought to be better for White.

18 ♘ce2! is a better move and gives White slightly the better position. There is no particular need for White to control b5 and it's not easy for Black to prevent White from strengthening his position with ♘f4-d3-e5. White also has the idea of ♘f3, exchanging dark-squared bishops, and then putting his knights on d4 and e5.

18...♕b6 19 ♘ce2 ♘c7 20 ♘f4

Now both sides are fully mobilized and my next move needs to be a constructive one. White intends h4-h5 and if he succeeds in softening the g6-point, I will have to watch out for trouble based on ♘e6 and ♖e6 moves. I had the impression that I had to act quite quickly and chose to go for a forcing continuation.

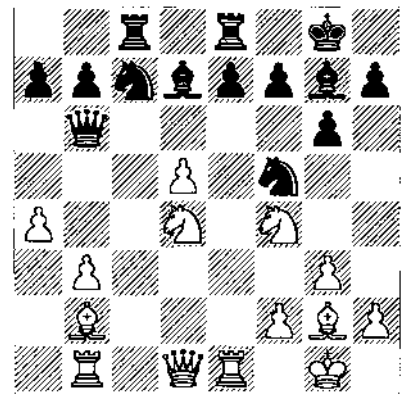
20...♘f5?! *(D)*

After 20...♘a6 21 h4 I can hold up the white h-pawn, but only at the cost of weakening g6:

a) 21...♘c5 22 h5 and here I didn't see any significant counterplay for Black and felt nervous about the weakening of g6. Moreover, 22...g5 23 h6! did not look too pleasant.

b) 21...h6!? and 21...h5!? are both possible, but I was still scared of a timely sacrifice on e6 followed by entry on g6.

c) 21...♗f6!? looks like an improvement. I didn't see this move at the time. The idea is to be ready to meet h5 with ...g5 but not to weaken g6 in the process. Critical is then 22 h5 g5 (not forced; 22...♘c5 23 hxg6 hxg6 might also be OK for Black) 23 ♘d3 ♗xd4 24 a5 ♗xf2+ 25 ♘xf2 ♕xa5, when Black has two extra pawns but a very shaky kingside. After 26 ♕d4 f6 27 ♖xe7 ♖xe7 28 ♕xf6 ♘f5 White probably has to take a draw, but few human players would allow their king to be terrorized in this way.



21 ♘xf5

Played after very little hesitation. Lev was confident that the following transformation was going to be in his favour. However, there was a safer alternative that would have assured White of some advantage: 21 ♗h3 ♗xd4 22 ♗xd4 ♕xd4 23 ♕xd4 ♘xd4 24 ♗xd7 ♘f3+ 25 ♔g2 ♘xe1+ 26 ♖xe1, and now:

a) 26...♔f8 27 ♖c1! is the type of detail that materialism makes it difficult to see. There is no need for White to take either rook yet, and by keeping the tension he prevents Black's king from making a difference.

b) 26...g5! is an important move that I had seen when deciding to play 20...♘f5. At the time, I made the judgement that this solved my problems, but I suspect I am still a bit worse after 27 ♖c1! ♘xd5 (this looks forced; 27...♔f8 28 ♗xc8 ♖xc8 29 d6! gxf4 30 ♖xc7 is winning for White; 27...gxf4 28 ♗xe8 ♖xe8 29 ♖xc7 is even worse than it looks) 28 ♗xc8 gxf4 29 ♗xb7, when Black is struggling to draw: 29...e6 30 ♖c5 ♖b8 31 ♗xd5 exd5 32 ♖xd5 fxg3 (32...♖xb3

33 g4! is no improvement) 33 ♖g5+ ♔f8 34 ♖xg3 ♔e7, when White's winning chances are about equal to Black's drawing chances (don't ask about White's drawing chances).

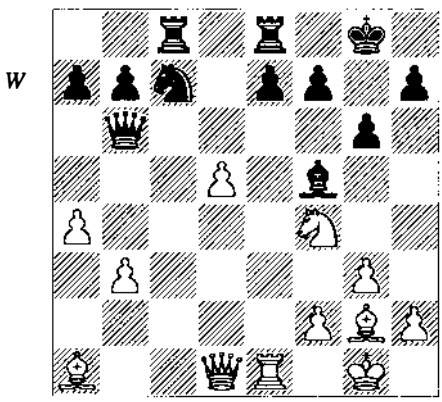
21...♗xf5 22 ♗xg7 ♗xb1

At the time, I felt that the position after 22...♔xg7 23 ♖b2 was just clearly better for White, but now I am not so sure. After 23...♕f6 24 ♖d2 ♖cd8 Black seems to be quite solid, even if the position of the knight on c7 is a little embarrassing.

23 ♗a1

With hindsight, 23 ♗b2 may have been stronger, but most humans would go back to a1 because they can foresee lines where the queen will take on b3, and don't want the bishop to be *en prise* on b2 in those cases.

23...♗f5 *(D)*



During the game, Aronian assessed this position as 'almost winning' for White and asked me: "Why did you give your great bishop on g7 for my stupid rook on b1?" He was only half-joking. I was sure that White had significant compensation here, based on the weaknesses around my king, White's bishop-pair, and especially the strength of the bishop on a1. The d5-pawn also exerts a cramping influence and Black's knight on c7 finds it hard to get to a square where it does something constructive. However, I also noticed that the weaknesses of b3 and d5 limited White's options and that it would not be easy, for example, for White to line up the queen and bishop on the a1-h8 diagonal. I had seen this position when playing 20...♘f5 and felt that it was playable, but more importantly, I didn't see a convincing alternative at that stage, and wanted to do something meaningful before my opponent consolidated his space advantage. What strikes me about this position is that it doesn't really feel like White is material down, and yet a crude point-count would suggest he is the equivalent of almost two pawns down. Aronian was right to like his position, but wrong to think it worthy of building a decisive attack immediately.

24 g4?

Too much, too soon. I believe White has full positional compensation so there was no need to change the nature of the position immediately. It would have been more unpleasant for me to deal with a gradual build-up. We spent some time playing around with this position in the post-mortem and felt that White was at least not worse, but there was no definite conclusion emerging. This is noteworthy, because I think when we see a clear material imbalance like we do here, we are inclined to look for a clear assessment. However, this position is a classic example of a position that needs to be played rather than analysed – there are just too many possibilities.

24 h4 ♖cd8 25 ♕f3 ♕b4 26 ♕e3 looks like a plausible line. From a practical point of view, the difficulty with playing Black is that you keep on thinking you should play ...f6 to block the a1-h8 diagonal, but you also know that you shouldn't weaken e6 and g6. Finding the right moment to play the move is almost impossible.

24 ♕f3 ♘a6 25 ♗f1 ♖c2 26 ♗b5 ♗g4! shows that Black also has some tricks.

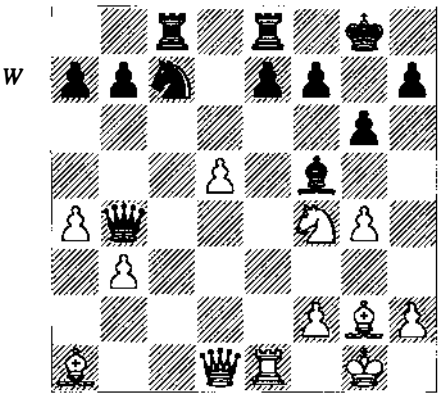
24 ♖e3!? was suggested by Luke McShane, with the idea of protecting b3 and allowing the queen to go behind the rook on the e-file.

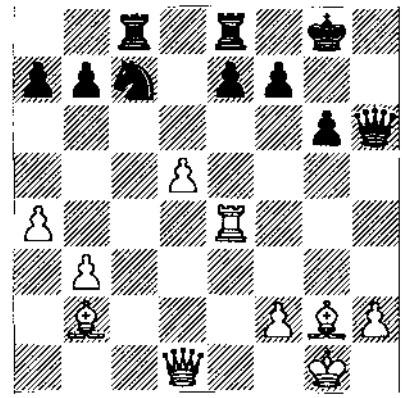
24...♕b4! *(D)*

I felt that my opponent had missed this move, which highlights that his queen is overloaded. However, he later said that he had seen this move, but missed a pivotal detail in the line that emerges.

25 gxf5 ♕xf4 26 fxg6

It's curious that in my mind I looked at lines where he played ♖e4 before taking – thus giving me a pawn for free on f5.





26...hxg6

Weakening the h-file, but the alternative is much worse due to the resulting weaknesses on e5 and e6.

27 ♖e4 ♕h6!

Aronian was disappointed by his own attitude during the game. "I was too emotional. Here I was thinking the guy will play 27...♕f5 28 ♖h4 f6 29 ♗e4 and he resigns. But of course the guy is a grandmaster and he will play 27...♕h6."

28 ♗b2 *(D)*

28 ♖e3 was Aronian's original intention, but he had missed the powerful counter-blow 28...♘xd5!!, which I had to see when playing 27...♕h6. After 29 ♗xd5 ♖ed8 the black rooks are powerful and I win a piece back by force due to the threat of ...♕g5 and the fact that the e3-rook can't move due to ...♖c1. White cannot shoot his way out of trouble: 30 ♗xf7+ ♔xf7 31 ♕g4 ♖c6 and all is well. This variation highlights an important principle about having a material advantage: that you should use it to attack. This applies here in the sense that the knight and rooks need to be activated, but it is also often true when one side wins a piece for some pawns. In those cases you generally must really make use of the piece in some constructive action as soon as possible, before the pawns grow in stature.

The sober 28 ♗b2 changed the momentum of the game in that I now have a free move. However, this gave me a very difficult decision to make, the old 'which rook?' problem. A fair amount of ink has been spilt to explain how to solve this problem, but by far the best insight was offered (purportedly) by the Argentinean grandmaster Oscar Panno: carefully decide which rook to move and then move... the other one!

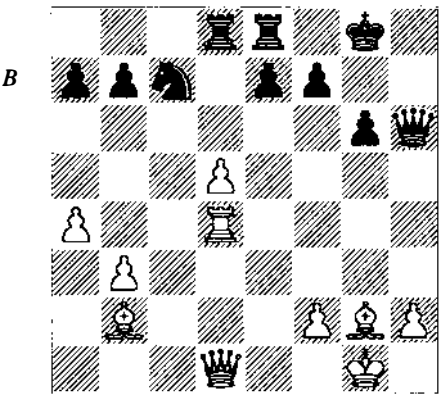
28...♖cd8

28...♖ed8 29 ♖c4! (White wants to keep the rooks, but the c-file is a big asset for Black so this is a good compromise – offering to exchange rooks at the cost of improving White's structure) 29...♘e8! (now it seems that Black is taking control, but White retains decent compensation) 30 ♕e1 ♔f8 31 ♖e4 ♖c7 32 ♖e3 and the game goes on. Aronian's feeling about this kind of position was that Black was perhaps objectively a bit better, but that in practical terms White had a perfectly acceptable position. It is important to reflect on what that means because when we hear a remark like that we tend to associate the 'truth' of the position with the objective assessment when in fact the practical assessment is much closer to the 'truth' in terms of what is likely to happen.

To be honest, 29 ♖e3 was the move that bothered me, even though I had a feeling it shouldn't work. I saw 29...♘xd5 30 ♖h3 ♘e3, and even saw the main line, but I didn't reach a firm assessment and I think I was worried about lines without really looking at them. For instance, I saw the line 31 ♕xd8+ ♖xd8 32 fxe3 ♖d1+ 33 ♔f2 ♖d2+ 34 ♔f1 ♕xh3 35 ♗xh3 ♖xb2 and also 31 ♕e2 ♖d1+ 32 ♕xd1 ♘xd1 33 ♖xh6 ♘xb2 34 ♗xb7 but in neither case did I infer that this meant White couldn't play 29 ♖e3. In the latter case, after 34 ♗xb7 I think I

even saw this as an unfavourable transformation and felt that White might be drawing 'somehow'. With just a little push I would have seen that it is in fact winning for Black: 34...♖b8 35 ♗d5 e6 36 ♗c4 ♘xc4 37 bxc4 ♖b4 38 ♖h3 ♖xc4 39 ♖a3 a5 with a winning rook ending. These lines remind me of one of the many great insights by Gerald Abrahams: that chess games are rarely lost by oversights but rather by "the failure to apprehend certainties".

29 ♖d4 *(D)*



29...♕h5

A practical move. White has some drawing chances if he takes, but loses almost all his winning chances. 29...♕g5!? is an alternative.

30 ♕d2

30 ♕xh5 gxh5 31 ♖h4 e5! 32 f4 ♘xd5 33 fxe5 ♘e3 is good for Black. Note that Black is doing well in almost all lines where the knight becomes active.

30...e5

A big commitment, but I need some central counterplay to divert White from mating me on the kingside.

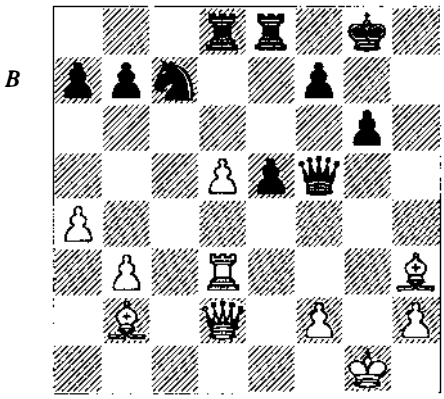
31 ♖d3 ♕f5!

This is the key idea. I have the positional threat of ...♘e6 and White has to do something fast.

32 ♗h3 *(D)*

32 ♖h3 is met by 32...♖xd5 33 ♕h6 ♖d1+ 34 ♗f1 ♕g4+.

I was initially scared of 32 d6?, but again it favours Black for the knight to become active, even at the cost of the exchange, since White's king is vulnerable to a counterattack: 32...♘e6 33 d7 ♖f8 34 ♗a3 ♘f4 and Black is winning.



32...♕f4?!

This move lacks clarity of purpose and was based only on the superficial judgement that a queen exchange should favour Black. This might be true if the structure stayed constant but allowing the b2-bishop access to f6 is a significant change in the position. After this move I had to play very well to draw. I could have drawn much more easily with 32...♕e4. If I had been sure that this forced a draw I might have played it – or at least asked myself, "If not 33 ♗g2, then what?" Aronian agreed that White would have had to accept the repetition.

32...♕f6!? is a winning attempt. At the time I was scared of 33 ♗g4, which doesn't introduce any concrete threat, but frees h3 for the rook and forces me to play a move. Now I have the computer-inspired 33...♕h4! putting the queen on the h-file where she feels like a target, but gaining a crucial tempo. Perhaps White's best is the simple 33 ♗g2!? but after 33...♖d6 34 ♖h3 ♘e6! 35 ♕h6 ♘f4 36 ♕h7+ ♔f8 37 ♖e3 Black is still better, though the position is still tense and the time-control has not yet been reached.

33 ♕xf4 exf4 34 d6

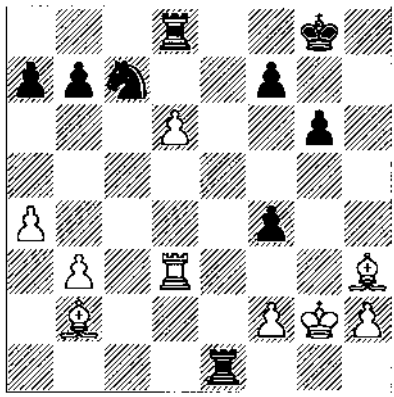
Now I have to fight to stay alive and play a series of 'only' moves:

34...♖e1+!

34...f3 35 ♔f1! leaves me without a follow-up.

35 ♔g2 *(D)*

B



35...f3+!

35...♘e6 36 ♗f6 ♖d7 37 ♗g4 is not winning for White, but Black is suffering and has a lot of tricks to deal with, especially the threat of ♖h3 and ♖h8#. 37...f3+ 38 ♔xf3 ♖c1 seems to hold on, but the game continuation is more convincing.

36 ♔g3

36 ♔xf3? f5!, winning for Black, is a neat point. I have a tempo to block the h3-bishop because White can't take on c7 due to the fact that I take on d3 with check.

36...♘e6 37 ♗f6 ♘c5!

And now I can use the awkward position of the white king for a ...♘e4+ resource. My opponent paused to think for ten minutes (he was over half an hour ahead on the clock) and decided to force a draw.

38 ♗xd8 ♘xd3 39 ♗f6 ♘c5 40 d7 ♘xd7 41 ♗xd7 ♖b1 42 ♔xf3 ♖xb3+ ½-½

Neither side has serious winning chances. Aronian made the interesting point that if I could force a passed a-pawn I might have winning chances, but a b-pawn was not so serious because White could deal with it while staying in touch with the kingside. To be honest, I felt that I should play on for a while, but was scared that I would screw up and somehow lose my a- and b-pawns for his a-pawn. Then the position would still probably be drawn, mainly because White will have to play f4-f5 at some point and be left with an h-pawn. At that point I would constantly harass his dark-squared bishop with a view to taking it and leaving White with the wrong-coloured rook's pawn. However, it had been such a nerve-wracking game, and over the last few moves I felt I might be losing, so I was glad to have survived.

Opportunity

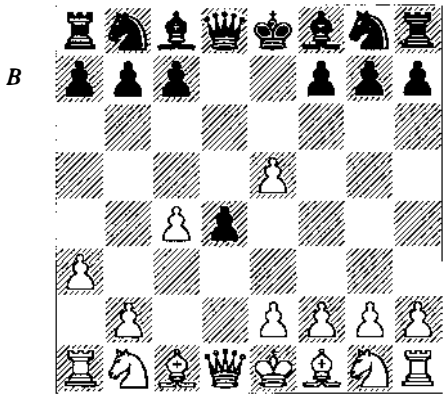
Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.
THOMAS EDISON

In light of Hübner's critique of Kasparov's three dimensions, I felt it was a mistake to refer to (non-clock) 'Time' as a dimension of chess. Firstly, because it is easy to conflate and confuse with clock time, and secondly because the significance of 'time' varies enormously. It seems to me that where it makes sense to speak of an advantage in time, it is an advantage in terms of available opportunities. A lead in development only matters if you have the opportunity to do something with that development, and 'the initiative' is only important in so far as you can do something with it. I am reminded of Matthew Sadler's description of the initiative in terms of a soccer match. Which side threatens to score? The side with the ball! However, if the side with the ball has ten men, and they are up against a solid defence, then even the initiative won't count for much. The issue is whether there are real opportunities. The other reason I prefer to refer to Opportunity is because we often have to sacrifice opportunities for other gains, perhaps in material or 'quality'. In these cases it makes sense to speak of the 'opportunity cost' of certain moves, in terms of what is lost in Material, Quality or Time, just as economists speak of the 'opportunity cost' of buying one thing instead of another.

Examples of opportunities taken or missed can be found throughout this book, so for now I focus on only one example, albeit an instructive one. It comes from Mikhail Shereshevsky's excellent book *The Soviet Chess Conveyor* (sadly out of print), but it would be easily missed because it concerns the Albin Countergambit, which, until very recently, was not taken very seriously at grandmaster level.

1 d4 d5 2 c4 e5 3 dxe5 d4 4 a3!? *(D)*

This move makes an ugly impression because it weakens b3. The 'opportunity cost' of the move is the chance to develop a piece, for instance with 4 ♘f3. However, controlling b4 might be worth it.



4...♘c6

The same position can arise from 1 d4 d5 2 c4 ♘c6 3 e3 e5 4 dxe5 d4 5 a3. However, in that case, Black doesn't have the option of 4...c5!?, which Shereshevsky doesn't seem to take very seriously and merely says that White then plays 5 e4 (5 e3 ♘c6 6 ♘f3 ♗g4 7 ♗e2 might be a more reliable approach). However, now Black can try 5...♘c6 6 f4 g5!?, when things don't seem so clear to me; e.g., 7 fxg5 ♘xe5 8 ♘f3 ♗g7 and Black has a strong pawn on d4 and the e5-square in return for a shaky kingside.

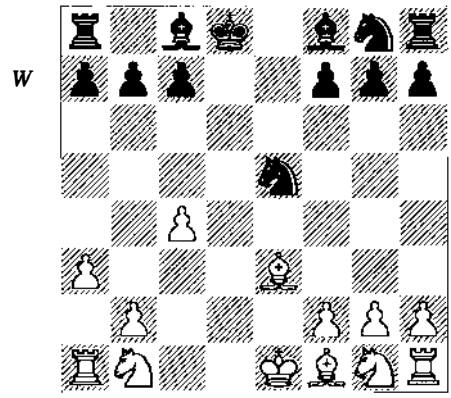
5 e3 dxe3

5...a5 6 ♘f3 ♗c5 7 exd4 ♘xd4 8 ♗e3 ♗g4 9 ♗e2 is given as better for White, but 7...♗xd4!? is worth considering.

6 ♕xd8+ ♔xd8 7 ♗xe3 ♘xe5 *(D)*

Shereshevsky comments: "White has achieved a definite success. Black is usually aiming at complications with attacking chances in the Albin Countergambit. Now Black has to fight for equality with the queens exchanged. The position is symmetrical. White has the better development and must find a way to seize the initiative."

When I first saw this, I wasn't too impressed by White's position, but it grew on me as a result of the next move:



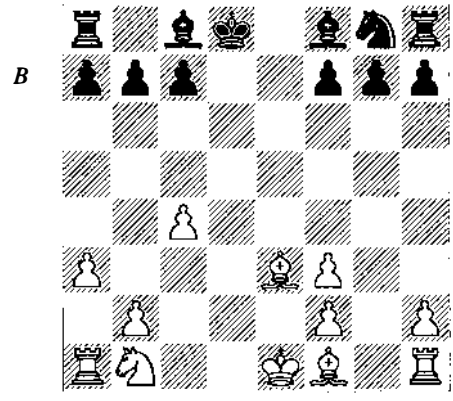
8 ♘f3!

Wow. On the face of it this is a major concession, and White seems to be completely disregarding his pawn-structure. c4 looks ugly, b3 is weak, and now there will be doubled f-pawns and an isolated h-pawn. If I didn't know better, I would think that White's first eight moves could not have been played by someone rated more than 1500. However, the truth is that it might take a very strong player to appreciate the importance and strength of this move.

Shereshevsky comments: "The only active black piece is the knight on e5, so it has to be exchanged. This has to be done immediately since 8 ♘c3 ♗e6 or 8 ♘d2 ♗f5 gives Black counterplay, because of the position of the e5-knight in the centre."

This comment sounds so simple, but how can he be so nonchalant about the wreckage of the kingside?

8...♘xf3+ 9 gxf3 *(D)*



"I believe that the reader will get easily convinced that after 10 ♘c3, 11 0-0-0 and 12 ♘e4 Black will have a difficult task to fight for the draw. No doubt Black might, after a thorough analysis, find a way to gradually neutralize White's initiative."

I didn't believe this at first, and I suspect that most readers will also be sceptical. However, you will quickly find, when you start to move the pieces around, that it is much more comfortable to be White. It is not easy to get over the idea that White is worse because of the structure, but what is lost in terms of 'quality' is gained in terms of opportunities. For instance after the plausible continuation 9...♗e6 10 ♘c3 ♔c8 11 0-0-0 ♘f6 12 ♘e4 ♘d7?! 13 ♘g5 White's advantage is becoming more tangible.

This is another example that highlights the difficulty of chess. Just when you think you have some positional understanding, a famous trainer comes along and tells you that 8 ♘f3 is a good move. Hopefully you agree that it is a good move now, but as I said in Part 1, the key is to absorb it in such a way that you might imagine playing this move, or something similar, yourself.

Making use of opportunities like 8 ♘f3 is hard enough, but even more complex is judging how much time to spend on deciding whether such moves are real opportunities. For instance, sometimes you have a choice between two moves. You know that one is decent and retains your advantage, but you can see that the other might be much stronger and win by force. However, in order to find out whether it wins by force you will have to think for several minutes. Many players just go ahead and try to find out whether it is winning or not, only to realize it is not so clear-cut and then play the simpler move but with much less time on the clock. A key element of practical strength, I believe, is to consider the value of Time at such moments. If you judge the chance that the line is winning to be 95%, then of course it is worth the time investment to find the winning path. However, if the chance the line is winning is more like 50% it might not be worth spending too much time on it. Once you start thinking about a line it is difficult to stop, so one aspect of being skilled in your use of Time is thinking of **the opportunity cost of thinking time**: if I lose twenty minutes now, I will certainly miss opportunities later; is it worth the investment?

Time

The bad news is: time flies. The good news is: you're the pilot.
MICHAEL ALTHSULER

The Ancient Greeks knew nothing of chess but they had a penchant for gods and sensitivity to the complexities of time. Chronos gave his name to linear, quantifiable, chronological time – time that makes us ask for *the* time, as if there could be such a thing. Yet the Greeks also had Kairos, a bit of a geezer. He was not so much god of *the* time, but rather the god of qualitative time, the god of timing. He sensed the right moment for certain acts, opportunity, chance and mischance, the auspicious and the not so auspicious. If you eat because 6.30 is dinner time, you are subject to chronological time; but if you eat because you're hungry, you are in tune with Kairos. Our obsession with counting minutes has cast a shadow over Kairos' kingdom, and threatens to subsume it completely, but I like to think that if Chronos and Kairos were to play a game of chess, Kairos would make a timely draw offer, and cause Chronos to lose on time!

Clearly there is more to time than hours, minutes and seconds, and in chess it is important to have a feeling for key moments and momentum; to sense when it is time to speed up and time to slow down. These are all aspects of 'Time' in chess. I have had the advantage in games against Michael Adams a couple of times, but whenever I had the advantage (usually slight) he would speed up his play and I found that just when he should be getting worried, I was the one feeling the pressure!

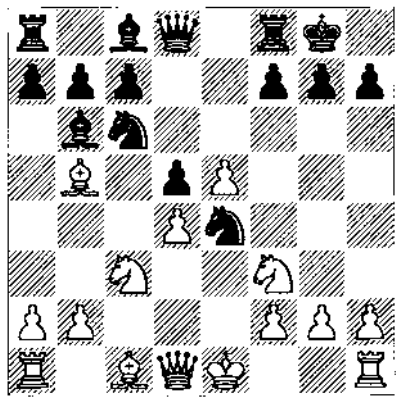
Many chess games are decided by Time. Sometimes this happens very crudely, when somebody loses on time, but in the following game the role of time was much more subtle, though no less significant.

Rowson – I. Sokolov
Selfoss 2003

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♗c4 ♗c5 4 c3 ♘f6 5 d4 exd4 6 e5

An unusual opening that I prepared specifically for this game.

6...d5 7 ♗b5 ♘e4 8 cxd4 ♗b6 9 ♘c3 0-0 *(D)*



10 ♗xc6

10 ♗e3 might be more accurate, but in any case I don't think White can gain an advantage in this line.

10...bxc6 11 ♗e3 f5

11...♘xc3 12 bxc3 ♗a6! 13 ♕a4 ♕c8! 14 ♕xc6 ♕f5 with more than enough compensation for Black – I.Sokolov.

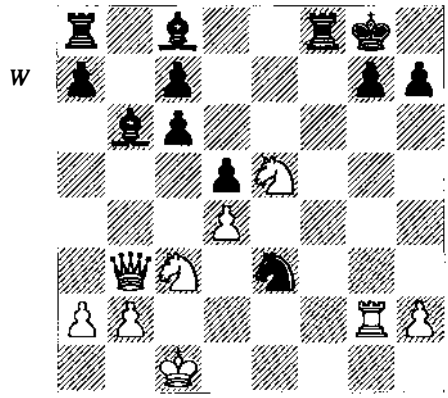
12 exf6 ♕xf6 13 ♕b3 ♕g6 14 ♘e5 ♕xg2 15 0-0-0 ♘xf2!?

15...♘xc3 16 ♕xc3 ♗f5 is also possible, but the attack on the g-file combined with the fragility of the c6/d5 complex gives White a dangerous attack.

16 ♖hg1 ♘xd1?

16...♕xh2? is not an improvement because 17 ♘xd5 wins, but 16...♕h3! is better. Best play then seems to lead to a draw: 17 ♖g3 ♕f5!? (17...♘xd1!? 18 ♘xd5 ♕e6 19 ♘e7+ ♔h8 20 ♘5g6+ hxg6 21 ♖h3+ ♕xh3 22 ♘xg6+ ♔h7 23 ♘xf8+ ♔h8 24 ♘g6+ with perpetual check) 18 ♗xf2 ♕xf2 19 ♘xd5 cxd5 20 ♕xd5+ ♔h8 21 ♕xa8 ♗xd4 (21...♕f4+ 22 ♖d2 ♗xd4 23 ♕d5 ♕f1+ {23...♗xe5 24 ♖f3!} 24 ♖d1 ♕f4+ 25 ♖d2 is also a draw) 22 ♖xd4 ♕xd4 23 ♘f7+ with an unusual perpetual.

17 ♖xg2 ♘xe3 *(D)*



18 ♖e2?

Missing a chance to knock out a heavyweight: 18 ♖g1! ♗e6 (18...♗xd4 19 ♘xc6! is decisive) 19 ♘xd5!!. Both of us missed this move during the game and in the post-mortem. I think it is natural to associate this move with the a2-g8 diagonal. Then when you see that nothing is happening on that diagonal, you give up, but the other main point of the move is to bring the queen to the g-file before Black is ready to defend g7: 19...♘xd5 20 ♕g3! gives White a crude but winning attack: 20...g6 21 ♘xg6!.

18...♗xd4 19 ♘xc6 ♗b6?!

19...♖f1+ 20 ♔d2 ♘c4+ 21 ♔d3 ♗xc3 22 ♘e7+ ♔f8 23 ♘xc8 ♖xc8 24 bxc3 ♖f3+ 25 ♔c2 d4! (a crucial detail, but it is asking a lot of Black to see this concept on move 19) 26 ♔d1 ♘e3+ 27 ♔c1 c5 28 ♕b7 ♖f1+ 29 ♔b2 ♖e8 and Black should win – I.Sokolov.

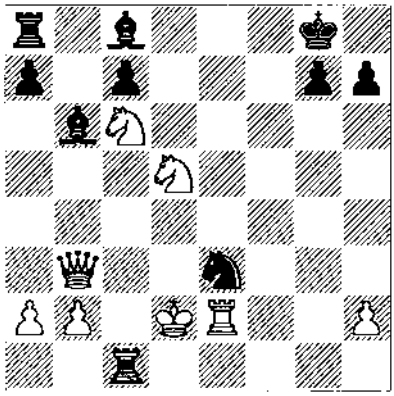
20 ♘xd5

I remember feeling a little confused around here, and knew that I was missing lots of important details. However, I did notice that he could force a draw, and had the impression that he was obliged to do so.

20...♖f1+ 21 ♔d2 ♖d1+ 22 ♔c3 ♖c1+ 23 ♔d2 *(D)*

This is the moment where Ivan's appreciation of 'Time' made a difference. He has the option of forcing a draw, and if he wants to play on then he has the option of repeating the position once before doing so. This would seem sensible, primarily because he was behind on the clock – he had

B



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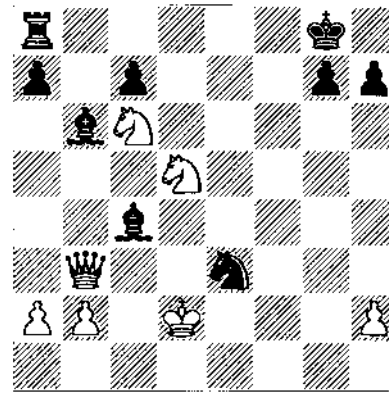


around 25 minutes to reach move 40 and I had about 35. However, he chose not to repeat the position, because he judged, correctly, that over the next few moves, I was the one who would have the difficult decisions to make, and was more likely to fall into time-trouble. This was an exceptionally astute insight, and may have been the difference between winning and drawing because I blundered just before the time-control, in a way that would have been unthinkable after it.

In general, I think it is wise to repeat the position when you have the chance, but I also think it's important not to do it like some kind of robot. Some Soviets used to say that you should always do it, but I think that's just dogma. Sometimes 'technical repetitions' are not good for you. It's hard to say why, but they can be encouraging for the opponent, and rather than making them complacent it can make them more likely to play accurately. Moreover, they sometimes serve to confuse you, and you end up 'performing' and playing the role of 'a player with good technique' rather than just being yourself and trying to get the job done. The key is to trust your own judgement and consider each case on its own merits.

23...♖c2+!?

23...♖d1+ 24 ♔c3 ♘xd5+ 25 ♔c2. I had noticed this key detail in advance, but I made the mistake of thinking that this line meant that Black should force a draw. When Ivan decided to play on, part of me succumbed to the 'moralizing' mindset.

24 ♔e1 ♖xe2+ 25 ♔xe2 ♗a6+ 26 ♔d2 ♗c4 *(D)*

Another critical moment in a very complicated game. I now had to choose whether to simplify into an ending that looks very slightly better for Black but is basically drawn, or take my chances in this random position with less time on my clock. For some reason I chose the latter, which was impractical, but perhaps not actually wrong if only I had been more accurate.

27 ♘de7+!?

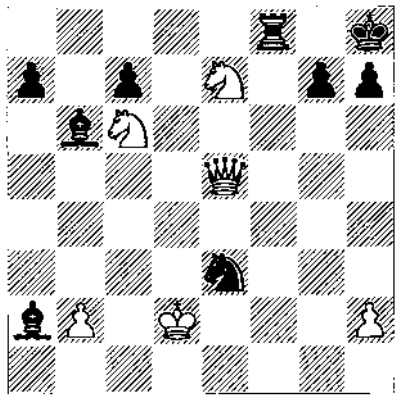
After 27 ♘xb6 ♗xb3 28 ♘xa8 there are various possibilities. The line that I feared most was 28...♘f1+ (28...♗d5 29 ♔xe3 ♗xc6 30 ♘xc7 ♔f7 31 ♘a6 is just a shade better for Black, but there are too few pawns to make anything of it) 29 ♔e1 (29 ♔c3 ♗xa2 30 h4! is also OK for White) 29...♗a4 30 ♘xa7 ♘xh2 31 ♘xc7 h5, when all results are still possible. After the game, Ivan asked me if I rejected 27 ♘xb6 because I thought Black was better in the resulting endings or because I was playing for a win. I didn't have a good answer, and I realized that this lack of clarity of purpose was something I needed to work on.

27...♔h8 28 ♕c3?

28 ♕a3! protects my a-pawn and prevents Black's rook from getting active. After this move I think White might actually be better. However, at this stage I was rather single-minded about getting the queen to h5 in order to create mating threats.

28...♖f8 29 ♕e5 ♗xa2! *(D)*

Ivan said that he was very pleased to get this pawn because it meant that I would have to mate him to win this game. His queenside is



now completely stable and even if things go badly wrong, and he is left with two bishops against my queen, I don't have any pawn-breaks left to help me win any of his remaining pawns. In a sense, taking on a2 therefore eliminates the third result (black loss) and thereby relieves a huge amount of psychological pressure. This kind of thought is fairly typical for practical players and relates to what I said about being Protean at the end of the last chapter. Ivan jumped from 'grabbing a pawn' in the position in front of him, to an awareness of the worst-case scenario and the judgement that this was no longer a problem for him. A few moves ago he was making very concrete calculations but now he was making judgements on a much more strategic and long-term basis, and he moved between these modes without any strain.

30 ♕h5 ♖f2+ 31 ♔c3

It turns out that this may be the right move, but immediately after the game we both thought that it was the decisive mistake. My opponent claimed that if I had played 31 ♔d3!? he was going to reply 31...♗f7 and offer a draw – a cruel thing to tell your opponent after the game! The reason for the draw offer was his intended line after 32 ♕h3: 32...♘f5!? 33 ♘xf5 ♖xf5 34 ♘e7 ♗e6 35 ♘xf5 g6, when Black will have a fortress (because he took on a2)! This is a pretty idea, but it turns out that Black has a decisive improvement in the form of 32...♗c4+ 33 ♔e4 g5!. This pawn forms part of a wide mating-net. For instance, 33 ♕h6?? ♖f4+ 35 ♔e5 ♘g4#.

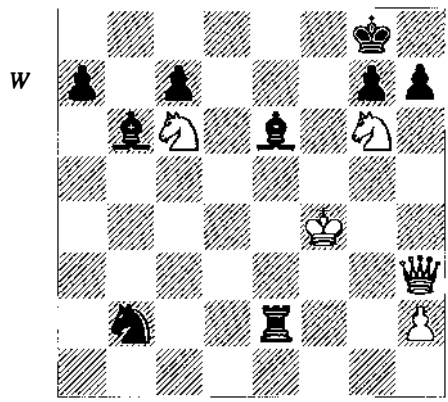
31...♗f7 32 ♕h3 ♘d1+ 33 ♔d3 ♘xb2+ 34 ♔e4 ♖e2+ 35 ♔f4 ♗e6

35...♖e6!? is probably better. Black then seems to emerge with an advantage, but only after a long line that we would never have fathomed in time-trouble.

36 ♘g6+

36 ♘d8!? would be a great choice if his flag was hanging, with the idea 36...♗xh3?? 37 ♘f7#! However, it simply fails after 36...♖f2+, which he had time to find. I fear I wasted a precious thirty seconds trying to make this work, time which might have saved me the game if I had used it to pause before my next move.

36...♔g8 *(D)*



37 ♘ce7+??

A blunder in severe time-pressure. With fewer moves to make and just a little more time I strongly suspect I wouldn't have played this move because I would have been able to consider the follow-up. The move played looks very natural, but I could have forced a draw by using the other knight, for the simple reason that it allows my queen to control d3. In other words I had to combine attack and defence, and allow a concrete appraisal to trump the more superficial impression that I should bring all my pieces as close to his king as possible.

In the case of 37 ♘ge7+! ♔h8 38 ♘g6+ ♔g8 39 ♘ge7+ it is very dangerous for Black to play on because after 39...♔f8 40 ♕xh7 White has a big initiative and without his knight coming to d3 with tempo, Black cannot generate serious counterplay.

37...♔f7 38 ♕xh7
And now the decisive counterattack:
38...♘d3+ 39 ♔f3 ♖e3+ 40 ♔g2 ♗h3+ 0-1

Quality

Man, if you gotta ask, you'll never know.
LOUIS ARMSTRONG (on being asked to define Jazz)

Quality is hard to define. The stronger you get, the easier it is to feel it, but no matter how good you are, it's difficult to explain in words. When I think of a player's 'positional understanding' I think first and foremost of their appreciation of quality – the most complex and elusive dimension of chess.

There is no seamless way to break down this concept because it refers to everything from weak squares, vulnerable pawns, strong doubled pawns, and it also includes elusive ideas like 'coordination' and 'harmony' which are always much easier to define ostensibly, showing it in action, than to explain in words.

There are examples of 'Quality' in every chess example in this book, so I have chosen a 'focus of convenience' to help to ground the concept, rather than attempt to give an exhaustive or exclusive definition. It seems to me that Paul Motwani's "4 S's": Structure, Space, Scope, and Safety, capture the bulk of what we are talking about when we refer to 'quality'. Needless to say, these are never completely separate elements. Doubled isolated pawns in front of your king, for instance, might be a problem of safety, structure, and possibly even scope if a piece is tied to defending the resulting weak squares. Even so, it is a useful way to make 'quality' a little less abstract while remaining broad and suitably elusive.

Structure

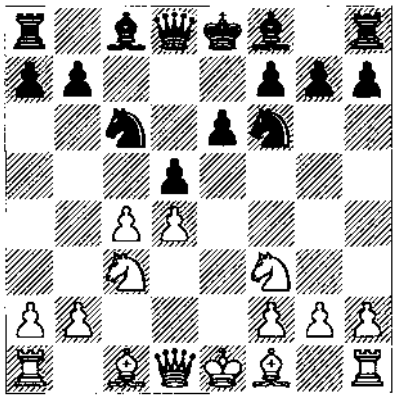
Pawn-structure is an extremely important positional feature, and often determines all sorts of other features like space, scope of the pieces, safety of the king, etc. However, it is important not to be fixated on how the pawns themselves look because the real issue is what the structure means for the pieces. Philidor's contention that pawns are the soul of chess is a striking one, but what it means depends entirely on what we think Philidor meant by 'soul'.

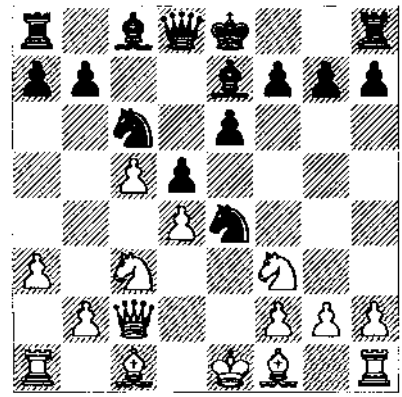
Fear not, we don't need to understand the nature of the soul to understand pawn-structure. I think what Philidor meant is that pawns are somehow the most fundamental aspect of chess, or the essence of chess, in the sense that the placement of the pawns determines the nature of the position in a way that the placement of other pieces does not. This makes sense given that there are so many of them! Half of the chess pieces are pawns, and all of these are potential queens. So where the pawns are, which squares they control and how vulnerable they are to capture matters crucially when you are trying to understand a position. The issue of controlling squares is a subtle one, because you need to appreciate not only which squares a pawn controls but which squares they can potentially control too. If a pawn is backward, or isolated and blockaded, it tends to have much less influence than if it is connected, free to advance, etc. So when you are considering structure, pay close attention to the role of the pawns, not just their number and their formal categorization (doubled, isolated, backward, etc.). The other thing to bear in mind is that pawns cannot usually do very much by themselves, and because there are so many of them, they are also the most dispensable of the pieces.

The game you are about to consider highlights that an advantage that is primarily structural does not have to involve *weak* pawns as such, but sometimes the *rigid* placement of the pawns, which are in themselves relatively secure, yield the opponent chances to play around them and to gain entry points into the position. Although weaknesses on a colour complex are not usually considered a 'structural' problem, I have always found this a little strange. It may be thought by some to be a category mistake, but that depends on how you define your categories!

Rowson – A. Kachiani
Bundesliga 2001/2

1 e4 c6 2 d4 d5 3 exd5 cxd5 4 c4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 ♘c6 6 ♘f3 e6!? *(D)*





This line is rather neglected by theory. Basically we now have a Semi-Tarrasch where Black has taken on d4 earlier than usual.

7 a3

7 c5! looks more to the point, and must be the critical line, but I was a little worried that this might be theory that I wasn't aware of, and I was explicitly warned by a team-mate not to walk into her preparation. 7...b6!? (this looks like the most thematic move but 7...♗e7 8 ♗b5 ♗d7 9 0-0 0-0 10 ♗xc6 ♗xc6 11 ♘e5 ♘d7 = is the only line given by NCO) 8 b4 bxc5 9 bxc5 (9 dxc5 a6! and White will find it hard to make an impact on the queenside) 9...♗e7 10 ♗b5 ♗d7 11 0-0 0-0 12 ♗xc6 ♗xc6 13 ♘e5 is probably a bit better for White, who seems to have control of the position, but Black has chances too due to his solid central structure and the weakness of the d4-pawn. After 13...♕c8 14 ♗g5! (to stop ...♘d7) 14...♖e8 15 ♕f3!? White has an enduring initiative.

7...♗e7?!

7...♘e4!, taking advantage of the luxurious a3, seems to equalize because Black changes the nature of the position to one where the move a3 has very little bearing on the position; e.g., 8 ♕c2 ♘xc3 9 ♕xc3 dxc4 10 ♗xc4 ♗e7 11 0-0 0-0 12 ♖d1 ♗f6 with equality.

8 c5! ♘e4 9 ♕c2 *(D)*

9...f5?!

This looks natural, and visually Black seems to have a good position. However, the following sequence is almost forced so it seems that this was a mistake. This is fairly typical of the way an error in the opening can last until the middlegame and beyond. There is so much happening in the position that it is easy to miss a pivotal detail. At this stage it was difficult to see my 15th move, but because of it 9...f5 is shown to be wrong.

9...♘g5!? looks like the best move here. White's knight on c3 is not especially well placed whereas the f3-knight and c1-bishop are both useful for controlling the crucial d4- and e5-squares – the key strategic squares in this type of structure. After 10 ♗xg5 ♗xg5 11 ♗b5 0-0 12 0-0 ♗f6 13 ♖ad1 Black is quite close to equalizing. 13...♘e7!? with the idea of coming back to c6 to pressurize d4 after ...a6 or ...♗d7 is a reasonable idea. With the locked central structure, White's b5-bishop is probably not worth as much as Black's remaining knight. So maybe White should have taken on c6 when he had the chance.

10 ♗b5!

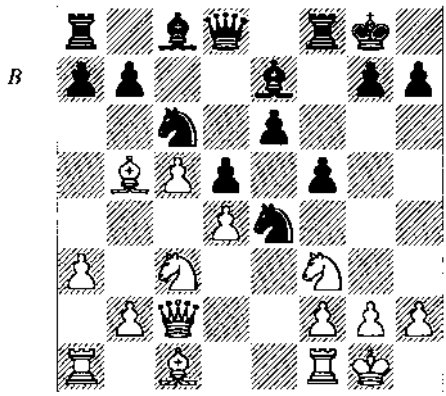
Moving my queenside majority is much less important than taking control of the e5-square and removing an attacker from d4.

10...0-0 11 0-0 *(D)*

I should probably have taken on c6 here.

11...♗f6?!

The most natural continuation, but perhaps Black could have made more of her position with 11...♘a5!?. This looks like a crazy move, but the aim is simply to keep certain pieces on the board – in this case to play ...a6 and then bring the knight back to c6. Far from abandoning e5, this move seeks to come back to protect it. 12 b4 a6! is an important detail, although White is probably still better after 13 ♗e2 ♘c6



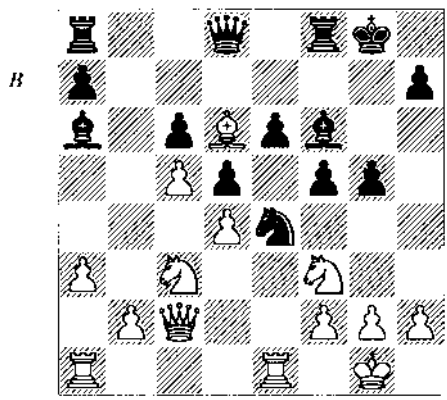
14 ♗b2! ♗f6 15 ♘a4. I doubt that 11...♘a5 can solve all Black's problems, but it would have given me a harder time than I had in the game.

12 ♗xc6 bxc6 13 ♗f4 ♗a6?!

A pseudo-active move. In light of what happens next, Black should have tried the immediate 13...g5. Then 14 ♗d6 ♘xd6 15 cxd6 ♕xd6 16 ♖fe1 c5 17 ♘b5 ♕b6! leads to an unbalanced position (instead, 17...♕b8? 18 ♕xc5 ♗d7 19 ♘c7! ♖c8 20 ♘xd5!! ♖xc5 21 ♘xf6+ ♔g7 22 ♘xd7 ♕xb2 23 ♘xc5 is winning for White, though I fear for the health of the horse on c5, who has definitely over-eaten). This suggests that I should probably play 14 ♗e5 and after 14...♗e7! White is probably still better, but it is not easy to take full control of the position.

14 ♖fe1 g5 15 ♗d6! *(D)*

An important move. After 15 ♗e5 ♗e7! the position is not totally clear because my knights don't really have places to go.



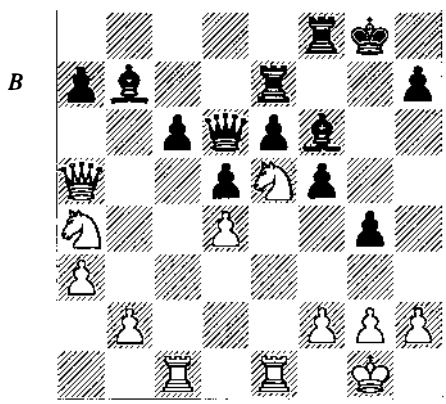
15...♘xd6 16 cxd6 ♕xd6 17 ♘a4

It's hard to say whether White's position is clearly better or just winning but certainly in practice it is difficult to play Black, because there are no active possibilities to improve the position, and the knights dominate the bishops.

17...♖ae8 18 ♘e5 g4 19 ♕d2!

A constructive move, eyeing up the a5-square. Even when you have an enduring positional advantage it's important to have some sense of where you are going, and how you are going to get there. This usually means small strategic operations taking one or two moves at a time, rather than grand plans which your opponent will usually thwart. In this case I was seeking simply to win Black's a-pawn while taking the g5-square away from the black bishop (and therefore allowing a rook to come to c1). Another feature of the position is that it's important not to rush into ♘c5 because the a6-bishop is a bit of a liability and Black really needs the c8-square for a rook (to protect c6) and a bishop (because it can get trapped on b5 with ♘c5 and a4).

19...♖e7 20 ♖ac1 ♗b7 21 ♕a5! *(D)*



Keeping the initiative and causing some discord in the black camp.

21...♕c7 22 ♕b4

An achievement, because the black queen was well placed on d6.

22...♗g5 23 ♖c2 ♖b8 24 ♘c5 ♗c8 25 ♕a4!

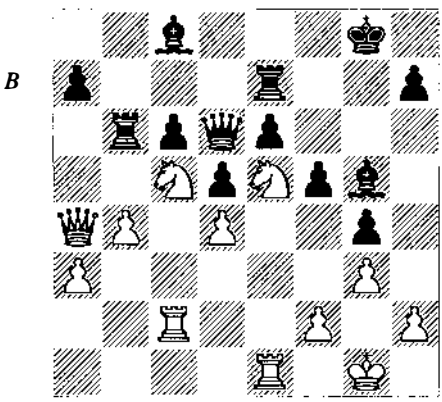
The queen is perhaps not optimal on a4 but it has some mobility, whereas the black rook, being tied to c6 and a long way from the kingside,

is very badly placed. Now that the rook is stuck, an attack against Black's king, based on opening some lines with h3 or f3, is more likely to succeed.

25...♖b6 26 b4

Perhaps not necessary, but I wanted all my pieces to be free, and b5 is sometimes a useful pawn-break.

26...♕d6 27 g3! *(D)*



I 'talked to my pieces' here. My king told me he didn't see any impending black counterattack, and that he wanted to help get at the opponent's king.

27...h5 28 ♔g2! ♔g7 29 h3! ♔f6 30 ♖h1!

Some new avenues have opened up.

30...♕c7

It felt like I should do something now, and I didn't see anything better than what I played. Fritz wants to play ♕b3, take on g4 and play f4. This also looks promising, but I was keen not to expose my king too much.

31 ♘cd3 ♗a6!

Taking the chance to breathe – since Black was short of time, I wasn't sure she would see this. Now I felt I could try something different, so I went back and planned to think again.

32 ♘c5

32 ♘f4 ♗xf4 33 gxf4 gxh3+ seemed a little unclear somehow and since she was so short of time, I wanted to give her a difficult decision about what to do with the bishop.

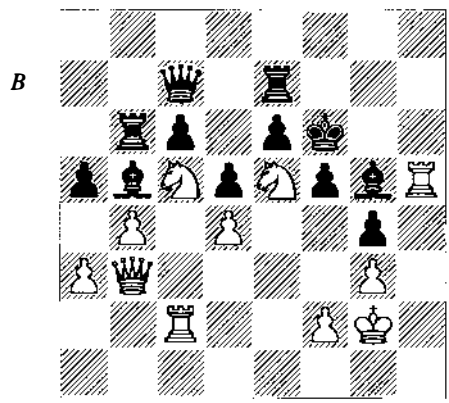
32...♗b5?!

Probably a mistake, but an understandable one – she doesn't want to go back into the cage. However, the bishop is needed to defend e6. Now after I play ♖h5, ...♖h7 won't be possible because I can take on g5 and then e6.

32...♗c8 33 ♖e2!? keeps the pressure.

32...♗c4! is the most combative move, and suggests that I might have strayed slightly, but it's rare to win games without any mess at all. 33 ♘xc4 dxc4 34 ♖xc4 ♕d6 is a bit murky but the more single-minded attack on the king seems to work: 33 hxg4! hxg4 34 ♖h5! ♖b5 35 ♖c3 a5 (35...♗d2 36 ♕c2 ♗xc3 37 ♕c1! leads inevitably to mate) 36 ♕d1 axb4 37 ♖xg5! ♕xe5 38 dxe5+ ♔xg5 39 ♖xc4 and White wins.

33 ♕b3 a5 34 hxg4 hxg4 35 ♖h5! *(D)*



With the unstoppable threat of giving away material! Black's problem in this game has been a chronically weakened dark-square complex. It's no surprise that the removal of the main defender of these squares signals the end.

35...♖b8

After 35...♖g7 36 ♖xg5 ♖xg5 37 ♕e3 White also wins easily – it's a bit shocking just how many threats White has here.

36 ♖xg5! 1-0

Because 36...♔xg5 37 ♕e3+ ♔h5 38 ♖c1 forces mate.

The above game illustrated that having a rigid structure can mean you are fatally vulnerable on a particular colour complex, in this case the dark squares. However, more conventional structural problems like doubled pawns can also be enough to lose a game. In the following game

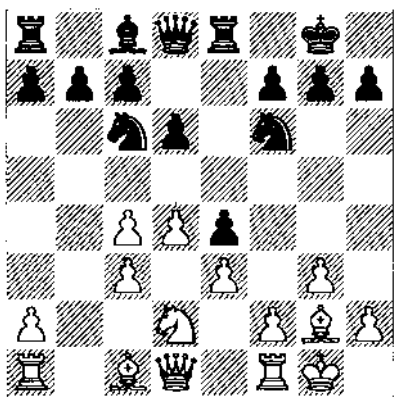
(notes based on original annotations for *CHESS* magazine) White gained a little activity (a few opportunities) in return for doubling his c-pawns, but one half-move meant that the opportunities were effectively snuffed out, and the quality issue, the structure, become the most important one:

McNab – Rowson
Scottish Ch, Hamilton 2004

1 c4 e5 2 ♘c3 ♘f6 3 ♘f3 ♘c6 4 g3 ♗c5 5 ♗g2 d6 6 e3 0-0 7 d4!?

This really surprised me, because there is no need to give Black the option of pinning the c3-knight. However, Colin must have felt that the positions that arose in the game were simply unclear, while I assumed they would favour Black. It seems that we were both right, in a way – as always, the verdict turns on each move. In any case, I think White should have castled here, when I was planning to give my c5-bishop a nest by ...a6; e.g., 7 0-0 a6 8 d4 ♗a7 with approximately equal chances.

7...♗b4 8 0-0 ♗xc3 9 bxc3 e4 10 ♘d2 ♖e8 *(D)*



I must admit that here I over-estimated my position. I felt that I had an excellent Nimzo-Indian position and that White's problems were compounded by his pawn on g3, which gives him further light-square weaknesses. However, the position may not be so clear if White plays with the requisite vigour.

11 ♖b1?

Another example of why chess is so difficult. What could be more natural than putting a rook on an open file? In fact, this casual move loses a crucial tempo and allows me to solve my problems on the queenside and therefore take control of the game.

11 f3! was necessary, and keeps the game finely balanced. Personally I would always rather be Black in such positions because I never feel too comfortable when my pawns are complaining, but objectively White can probably generate sufficient activity to compensate for his damaged structure. Then:

a) 11...exf3 12 ♕xf3 ♗g4 13 ♕f4 ♗h5 14 ♖b1 ♖b8 15 ♖xb7 ♖xb7 16 ♗xc6 ♖b8 17 ♗xe8 ♕xe8 with an unclear position. Even though White is a pawn up, the opposite bishops, damaged structure and dodgy white king mean that Black is at least OK. This position after 18 e4 ♗g6 19 ♖e1 ♕c6 is hard to assess, but I think it's easier to play Black.

b) Also possible is 11...♗f5!? 12 ♘xe4 ♘xe4 13 fxe4 ♗g6 (13...♗xe4? 14 ♗xe4 ♖xe4 15 ♖xf7!) 14 ♖b1 b6 15 ♖b5 and as long as White plays with enough dynamism I shouldn't get a chance to reach my light-squared utopia. Now the exchange sac ♖bf5 is a real possibility.

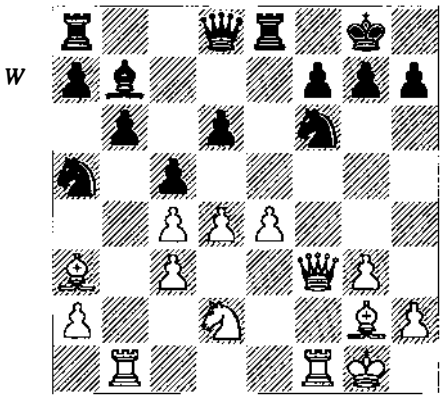
c) To give an illustration of my optimism here, I felt that Black could also consider 11...b6 but after 12 ♘xe4 ♘xe4 13 fxe4 ♗b7 14 e5! dxe5 15 ♗d5 I would have regretted underestimating bishops, pawn-centres, and f-files.

11...b6 12 f3 exf3 13 ♕xf3 ♗b7!

Now that my queenside is organized, and there are no ♖xb7 tricks, I have a clear advantage. 11 ♖b1 was a half-move that affected the whole position.

14 ♗a3 ♘a5 15 e4 c5 *(D)*

I was pleased to get this move in, because it really snuffs out White's unopposed bishop. I just need a few more organized moves to get complete control, and then eventually I can turn my attention to the c-pawns. The key in such positions is not to rush for your opponent's weaknesses. Such pawn weaknesses are not likely to go away. It is more important to focus on soaking up any traces of the initiative, because that is often more dangerous than it looks, and can sometimes be strictly temporary. In this case,



White's initiative is not real at all: e5 can be prevented, the f-file can be plugged and White's knight is going nowhere because it needs to defend c4. White can thrash around for about ten moves with threat-gestures, but once the kicking stops, as it inevitably will, the c-pawns will be red-faced, and ripe for the plucking.

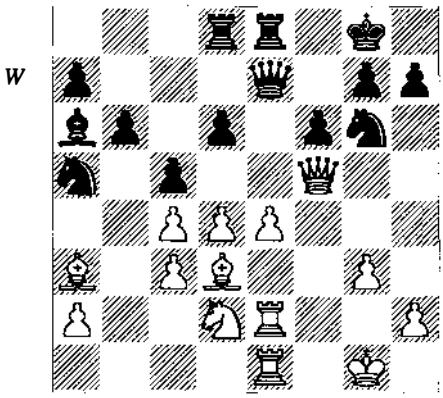
16 ♕f4 ♕e7 17 ♖be1 ♘d7 18 ♖f2 f6 19 ♗f1

Colin offered a draw here. Although it looks superficially balanced, I think White's position is already strategically lost. As long as I can hold up any tricky e5 advances, I will eventually win a c-pawn or two.

19...♗a6 20 ♗d3 ♘f8!

An important move, which gives me some freedom to manoeuvre, and dislodges White's queen from a happy staging post.

21 ♖fe2 ♘g6 22 ♕f5 ♖ad8! *(D)*



I was pleased with this calm move, which utilizes a quiet piece to discourage e5, and allows me to play ...♗c8 without creating any disharmony in my position.

23 h4 ♕f7!

Eyeing up c4, making contact with h5, and freeing e7 for the knight.

24 ♕d5

After 24 h5 ♘e7 25 ♕f3, 25...♘xc4 wins a clear pawn, and allowing White to play h6 is not so serious. It's important to seize the moment because 25...h6 26 d5!? would keep White in the game. Although the position would then be stable, and clearly better for Black, I cannot get the e7-knight to e5 and there is no immediate way to force the win of the c4-pawn.

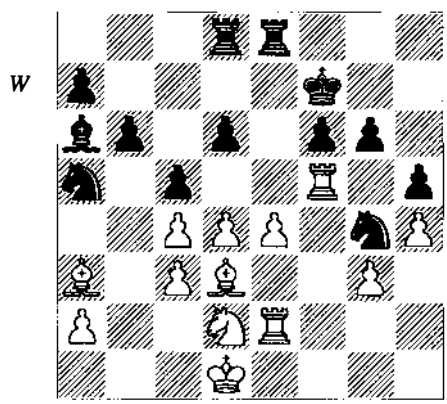
24...♘e7 25 ♕xf7+ ♔xf7 26 ♔f2 h5!

I wasn't too sure what my knight would do on g4, but I felt it was better there than e7, and I always have time to come back if the knight turns out to be idle on g4. 26...♘ec6 27 ♔e3 leaves Black without an obvious continuation.

27 ♖f1?!

27 ♖g1 was slightly more awkward. I hadn't decided what to do in that case. 27...♘ec6 28 ♔e3 ♗c8 was my idea, but looking at it now, I am not sure what I was planning. Black is still fully in control, but I have lost some momentum and direction – crucial losses psychologically, even if you can't see them on the board.

27...♘g8 28 ♔e1 ♘h6 29 ♔d1 ♘g4 30 ♖f5 g6 *(D)*



I played this with a fair degree of caution. I didn't want to weaken f6, but then I took another look at the bishop on a3, and I felt I was safe enough for the time being.

31 ♖f4

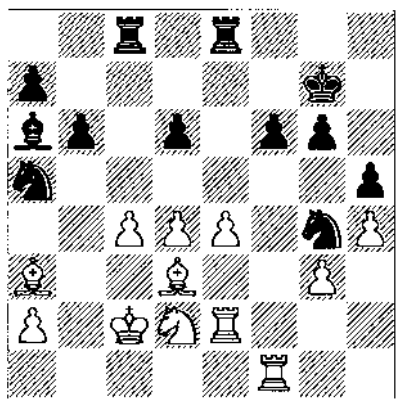
I can imagine some players (Tiger Hillarp Persson comes to mind) who would rather pose me fresh problems with a move like 31 ♖d5!?, and start enjoying themselves around here. It's a question of choosing your evils. Being the exchange down for almost nothing is bad, but it is not necessarily worse than being strategically lost and inevitably losing a pawn for nothing. This alternative approach would also have the advantage of knocking me off balance and forcing me to play a completely different type of position. After 31...♗b7 32 ♗c1 I should probably delay taking on d5, but ♘f3 and ♗f4 might force my hand. Black is winning of course, but personally I would have found this a more difficult advantage to exploit.

31...♔g7

Now everything seemed to be in place and I felt ready to win the c4-pawn.

32 ♔c2 ♖c8 33 ♖f1 cxd4 34 cxd4 *(D)*

B



Around here I felt that there should be a decisive tactical solution but in the end I settled for winning a clear pawn and exchanging some pieces.

34...♘xc4 35 ♘xc4 ♖xc4+!?

35...b5? looks tempting, until you see 36 ♔c3!, when White is no longer worse. However, perhaps 35...♗xc4 36 ♗xc4 ♖xc4+ 37 ♔d3 ♖ec8 was more precise. After 38 ♗b2 I found it hard to judge whether this was a better version of the game. At the time I wanted to reduce the tension in the position, but White's rooks can't do very much here and it's not clear what White does against a gradual advance of the queenside pawns.

36 ♔b3 ♖ec8 37 ♗b2 ♖c3+!

An elegant move, forcing favourable exchanges.

38 ♗xc3 ♗xd3 39 ♖fe1 ♗c4+!

Forcing the king back, as now 40 ♔b4? fails to 40...a5+ 41 ♔a4 ♗xe2 42 ♖xe2 ♖xc3.

40 ♔b2 ♗xe2 41 ♖xe2 ♔f7?!

This may have been one of Kramnik's post-time-control 'toilet moves'. 41...♖e8 is more accurate, when I can force through ...d5 without the pottering around.

42 ♔c2 ♖c4 43 ♔b3 b5 44 a3 ♔e6 45 ♖e1 a6 46 ♖e2

At this stage I wasn't too sure how to exploit my advantage so I manoeuvred for a bit.

46...♘h6 47 ♗d2 ♘f7 48 ♗c3 ♘h6 49 ♗d2 ♘g4 50 ♗c3 ♖c8

Now I realized that there was a simple win if I can play ...♖e8 and ...d5 because White won't have time to get his king beyond a5.

51 ♗d2 ♔d7 52 ♗c3 ♖e8 53 ♔b4 d5! 54 e5 fxe5 55 dxe5 ♔e6 56 ♔a5 ♖c8!

An important detail: I effectively plug all the holes in my position and can slowly work on pushing my d-pawn.

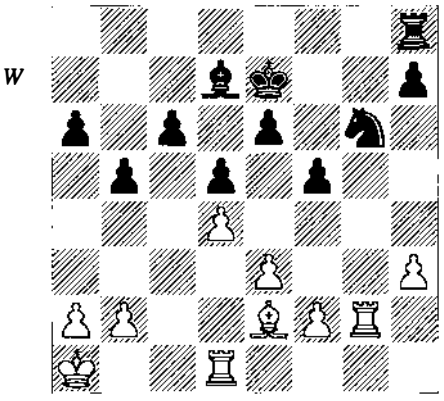
57 ♗b2 ♖c6 58 ♗a1 ♘h6! 59 ♖e3 ♘f5 60 ♖c3 ♖xc3 61 ♗xc3 d4 62 ♗e1 d3 63 ♔xa6 ♘d4! 64 ♔b6 ♘c2 0-1

Scope

If only the whole world could appreciate the power of harmony
MOZART

Scope refers to the actual influence of the pieces and their potential influence. In this sense it is a broad concept and refers to the capacity of the pieces to do things. However, it is different from 'activity' because it captures not only the current role of the pieces, but also their potential role. When the pieces all seem to have scope, and are working well together, we begin to see 'coordination' and 'harmony'. The following two examples should shed some light on this (*see diagram on next page*):

I have just taken a rook on h8 with my knight and Black has recaptured. The position should



Rowson – Tyomkin
European Junior Ch, Tallinn 1997

be good for me because I am the exchange up and the pawn that Black has in return for this is the backward pawn on c6. Moreover, the g-file is only temporarily blocked and I can also look forward to opening lines on the queenside, though this won't be trivial, because if Black manages to play ...a5, I can only open the queenside if I manage to keep his rook occupied on the kingside (e.g. with ♖a3 forcing ...a4 and then playing b3; or ♖c5 intending a4).

I decided that I wanted to remove the knight from g6 immediately in order to make use of my rooks on the g-file. I calculated a line to check that Black couldn't simply take another pawn and went ahead, but in the process I made an instructive mistake.

27 h4?

Given that I framed the problem in terms of removing the knight from g6, this makes good sense. However, my e2-bishop, although it looks happy enough, is in fact a long-term problem, and I should have taken the opportunity to exchange it here. In the position that arises, Black's g6-knight has far more scope than my e2-bishop, and this is the main reason I can't make use of my material advantage.

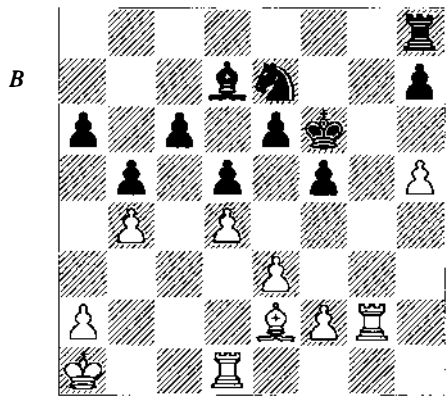
27 ♗h5! is the best move, trying to exchange the bishop for the knight, followed by preventing Black's counterplay with ...f4 by playing f4 myself. If Black allows me, I will play b4 followed by a4 and enter on the queenside. If Black plays ...a5 to prevent this, his rook will be somewhat tied to the defence of the queenside and I will have better chances of entering on the kingside.

I barely considered this at the time because it didn't seem to help me achieve my objective of unblocking the g-file. However, I was far too single-minded here and didn't appreciate that my e2-bishop was actually a positional problem.

27...♔f6

27...♘xh4? 28 ♖g7+ ♔d6 29 ♖h1 ♘g6 30 ♖xg6 was the line that seduced me into playing h4. **This is something to watch out for: burning strategic bridges for seductive short-term tactics that never actually happen!**

28 h5 ♘e7 29 b4 *(D)*



Otherwise Black plays ...a5 and it's hard to see a way through. Now the difference is that Black keeps his versatile knight, while I am still stuck with my ineffectual bishop on e2. I have noticed that this kind of positional detail, when we have a bishop that is not obstructed by our own pawns, but by the opponents, is often misunderstood. This is the issue of naughty bishops who don't know they are bad. We don't tend to think of the e2-bishop as a problem, but it is a very big problem and plays almost no part in my plans to enter Black's position. In fact, in this position, the e2-bishop is every bit as 'bad' as the d7-bishop but the difference is that Black's bishop is useful for defence, while mine is not particularly useful for attack. This reminds me that Roddy McKay, a Scottish IM who was respected by Karpov in his youth, once remarked:

"It took me twenty years to realize that the best way to evaluate a position quickly is to look closely at the bishops." If we were to do that in this case we would see that White will find it hard to win this game because his bishop is playing no significant part in it.

29...♗e8 30 ♔b2 ♗f7 31 ♖a1 ♘c8 32 a4 ♘d6 33 axb5 axb5 34 ♖a7 ♖c8 35 ♖d7 ♘c4+ 36 ♗xc4 bxc4 37 h6 ♗g6 38 ♖b7 f4!

A disturbing move, which made me take stock of the position. I realized that Black had everything covered now and was about to become quite active, so I decided it was time to offer a draw. This turned out to be a costly half-point, since my opponent went on to become European Junior Champion, while I took silver, a half-point behind!

39 ♖g1 ½-½

Rowson – B. Filipović

Pula 2002

1 e4 b6 2 d4 ♗b7 3 ♗d3 e6 4 ♕e2!?

4 ♘f3 c5 5 c3 ♘f6 6 ♕e2 ♗e7 is also better for White, but my opponent has been playing this line all his life and I didn't want to go straight into the main line without having any particular ideas prepared.

4...d5

4...c5 5 d5! is the idea, gaining space and blocking out the b7-bishop.

5 e5 c5 6 c3 ♕c8!?

This came as a surprise, but I quickly realized that I didn't have to give my opponent everything that he seemed to want.

7 ♘f3 ♗a6 8 c4!

This loses a pawn, but gains more than enough in return. 8 0-0 ♗xd3 9 ♕xd3 ♕a6 looks comfortable for Black.

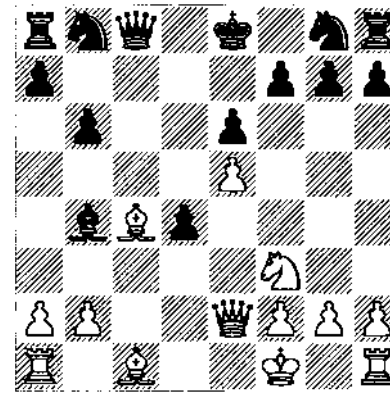
8...cxd4 9 ♘bd2 dxc4 10 ♘xc4 ♗xc4

10...♗b4+ 11 ♗d2 ♗xd2+ 12 ♘fxd2 ♗xc4 13 ♘xc4 and the knight comes to d6.

11 ♗xc4 ♗b4+ 12 ♔f1! *(D)*

Perhaps my opponent had underestimated this move. On the face of it, I am a pawn down and have lost my right to castle. However, a deeper appraisal reveals that White is in fact significantly better here, and the advantage consists primarily of having greater scope for the

B

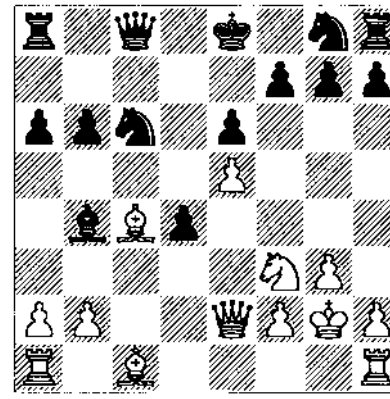


pieces. There is no structural advantage as such, and if you include the space behind the d4-pawn as Black's, then space is approximately equal. So to the uninitiated it's not clear where the compensation is, never mind the advantage.

Firstly, Black's extra d-pawn is actually a bit of a burden because it restricts the scope of his minor and major pieces, while I can easily play around it. This is mainly because I have a light-squared bishop and Black sorely lacks one. The diagonals f1-a6, h1-a8 and b1-h7 are all very important, and Black can't compete on them without compromising himself (e.g. by walking into a pin). Moreover, the king on f1 is not unhappy because he knows that the position will be closed long enough for him to have time to perch himself happily on g2. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Black has some difficulty completing his development because if and when he plays ...♘ge7, the b4-bishop is short of squares.

12...a6 13 g3 ♘c6 14 ♔g2 *(D)*

B



The king is quite happy on g2 and the rook might want to stay on h1 to support the advance of the h-pawn.

14...b5

It looks like my opponent is trying to reclaim some light squares but he actually had a problem completing development; e.g., 14...♘ge7 15 a3 and where does the bishop go? This is another illustration of White's advantage in scope: the number of available squares.

15 ♗d3 ♘ge7 16 a3 ♗a5 17 a4!

Good timing: first the bishop was pushed out of contact with the kingside, and now it looks misplaced whichever way Black reacts.

17...b4 18 ♗g5 h6?

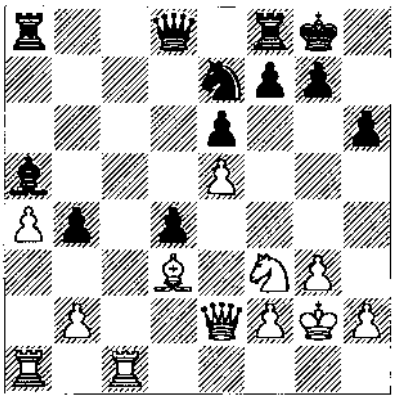
This eases my task considerably and further weakens the light squares. However, Black's position may already be beyond repair. After 18...♘d5 19 ♖hc1 ♕b7 20 ♗d2! h6 21 h4, although White has no immediate threats, I can build up at leisure and Black's king has no safe abode.

19 ♗xe7 ♘xe7 20 ♖hc1 ♕d8

20...♕b7 21 ♗e4 ♘d5 22 ♘xd4 0-0 23 ♘c6 is also very good for White.

21 ♗xa6 0-0 22 ♗d3 *(D)*

B



Now I have a decisive positional advantage without any material deficit.

22...♕d7 23 ♕e4 g6 24 h4 ♗b6 25 h5 ♖xa4 26 ♖xa4 ♕xa4 27 ♕f4! ♕b3 28 ♗c2 ♕d5 29 ♗e4 ♕d7 30 ♕xh6 ♘f5 31 ♗xf5 gxf5 32 ♘g5 f6 33 exf6 ♗d8 34 f7+?!

34 ♖c8! (Short, *Sunday Telegraph*) was more precise.

34...♖xf7 35 ♘xf7 ♕d5+ 36 ♔g1 ♔xf7 37 ♕g6+ ♔e7 38 h6 d3 39 h7 ♕d4 40 ♕h5 ♕xb2 41 ♖d1 ♕h8 42 ♖xd3 ♗b6 43 ♕g5+ ♔f8 44 ♖d7 1-0

Space

Space isn't remote at all. It's only an hour away if your car could go straight upwards.
FRED HOYLE

If it makes sense to speak of 'T
School of Chess', one of the most provocative things to come out of the 's
ing: "The Space Principle: The unit of space is a square on the chessboard. The space associated with a position incorporates squares occupied, controlled and potentially controlled and occupied by pieces. The space principle treats space as the most important asset in the chess struggle apart from material. The importance of space cannot be over-emphasized. Previous schools had an inadequate understanding of space and failed to recognize it as more important than the initiative." (From *The Chinese School of Chess*, Liu Wenzhe, Batsford 2002.)

Keep this 'pr
ing the following game:

Rowson – Sarakauskas
Port Erin 2004

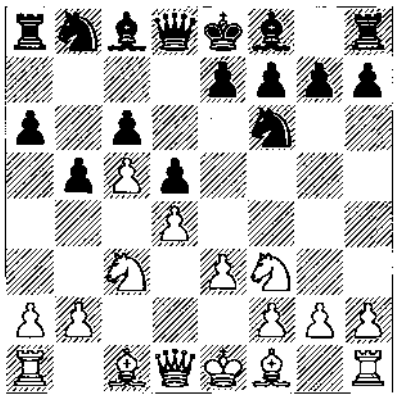
1 d4 d5 2 c4 c6 3 ♘f3 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 a6 5 e3 b5 6 c5!?

A relatively modern treatment of the ...a6 Slav. White stakes out a space advantage based on the opposition of the pawn on c5 against the pawn on c6. It might seem more logical to play c5 before Black has played ...b5 so that the b7-pawn is fixed as a backward pawn, but the other side of that story is that Black can chip away at White's space advantage with ...b6. Again keeping Hübner in mind, it is not clear that c5 gives White 'a
rather it fixes a weakness on c6 and one of White's goals is to win the c6-pawn. In this goal he might be assisted by his extra space, but that remains to be seen. It is also possible that Black will hit back in the centre and White's position will be shown to be overextended.

6...g6 *(D)*

6...♗g4 7 ♕b3! is theoretically 'hot', and the verdict is that White is doing well because the weakening of the kingside structure seems to matter less than the pending queenside breakthrough with a4 and possibly ♘a2-b4.

W



7 ♗d2

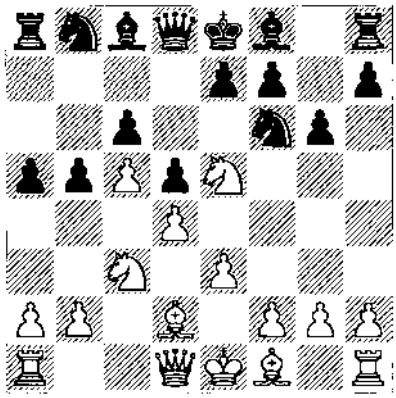
With the positional threat of b4 followed by a4, when White would control the 'levers' on the queenside (see P.Nikolić-Gallagher in Chapter 8 for another example of this theme).

7...a5

Black decides to prevent b4, but ♗d2 is a developing move while ...a5 is not, so I decided that I could use the time gained to try to play more directly than I had previously intended.

8 ♘e5! *(D)*

B



8...♘fd7

Black should perhaps have finished development before challenging my knight.

9 f4 f6

Now I spent a while thinking of how to deal with the fact that Black will play ...e5 after my knight retreats. I felt there was something artificial about Black's play and that I should have a good answer, but it took me about 15 minutes to find it.

9...♘xe5 10 fxe5 ♗f5 is worth considering, but White still has a comfortable space advantage.

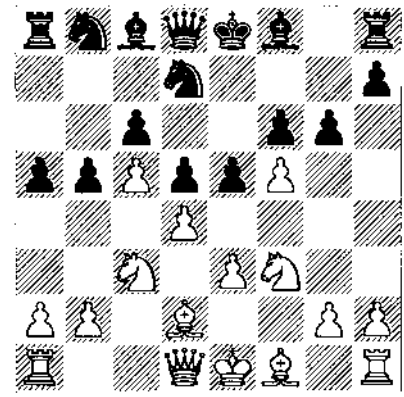
10 ♘f3! e5

10...♗g7 might look safer, but then I would seriously consider 11 h4!? with the aim of causing trouble before Black is ready for it.

10...f5 leaves me with a long-term advantage. Eventually I would probably have to sacrifice something if I want to break through, but there is no risk for White, and a lot of squirming for Black.

11 f5! *(D)*

B



This very powerful move yields White even more space and leaves Black severely congested. Look at the pawns on c5 and f5 compared to the pawns on c6 and f6. This is the basis of White's advantage.

11...♗g7

11...gxf5 12 ♘h4 is the idea. This would give White control of f5 and would be absolutely devastating for Black.

12 g3!

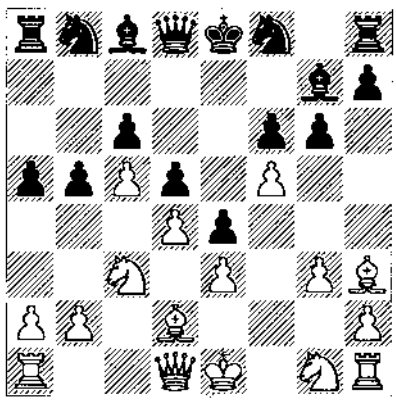
With all the pieces still on the board my space advantage is very significant. Here I realized, in

accordance with what I argue in Chapter 8, that I should focus on 'being' for the next ten moves or so, in terms of keeping the position stable and allowing change to happen of its own accord rather than forcing the issue. In this respect 12 g3 is a controlled move. 12 g4!? is playable, but riskier. **When you have a space advantage it is often wise to concentrate on consolidating the space gained before extending it further.**

12...♘f8 13 ♗h3!

The idea behind 12 g3. By holding the f5 point I prevent Black from freeing his position.

13...e4 14 ♘g1 *(D)*



No worries there. The position is closed so 'opportunity' is not at a premium. The main thing is to keep control of the position. Black gained some space back with 13...e4 but he also fixed the centre, and didn't really solve the congestion problems caused by my pawns on c5 and f5.

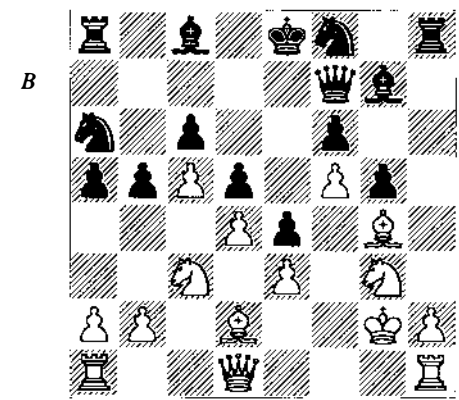
14...g5?!

There was no need to release the tension yet, but perhaps my opponent underestimated my next move. 14...♘a6 is better.

15 g4!

Much more attractive now that the centre is closed. This move ensures that I can open the kingside at some point, which may not have been possible if Black managed to play ...h5. My only worry in this position is that I had taken a lot of time to get here. I was a bit late for the game and took a while over my opening moves so at this stage I was trying to speed up. I have lots of choices in what follows, but I think all of my moves are at least OK, even if there may have been improvements. The reason I have chosen this game to emphasize the nature of a space advantage is because for the whole game I had pawns on c5 and f5 against pawns on c6 and f6. That doesn't seem like much, especially because Black has e4 vs e3 but my incursion into Black's territory really seems to limit the scope of his pieces, while Black's pawn on e4 is a juicy target for a sacrifice at a suitable moment. This already hints at why I feel a crude weighing of space as 'squares controlled' is dangerous. In this case a timely sacrifice on e4 is very likely to improve my position and be difficult for Black to deal with, while if Black were to sacrifice on c5 or f5 to free his position, it is likely that I could always deal with the consequences quite comfortably.

15...♕c7 16 ♔f1 ♕f7 17 ♔g2 h5 18 gxh5 ♕xh5 19 ♗g4 ♕f7 20 ♘ge2 ♘a6 21 ♘g3 *(D)*



Threatening ♗h5.

21...♔d8 22 ♘ce2 ♘c7 23 h3

A practical move, simply protecting an unprotected piece. I don't want to have to worry about tricks on the kingside every move, based on ...♖h4 or ...♘g6 or whatever. This way I can focus my energy elsewhere.

23...♘d7 24 ♕e1!?

Due to my time-shortage I wanted to play fairly directly and with a certain amount of rhythm. However, there was something to be said for 24 ♗e1, intending to bring the bishop

to h2. Then I could follow up by putting my knight back on c3 and sacrificing on e4. I suspect this plan is harder for Black to deal with, but I also feared that it would introduce a third result into the equation and that working out the details would be time-consuming, so I preferred to keep things simple.

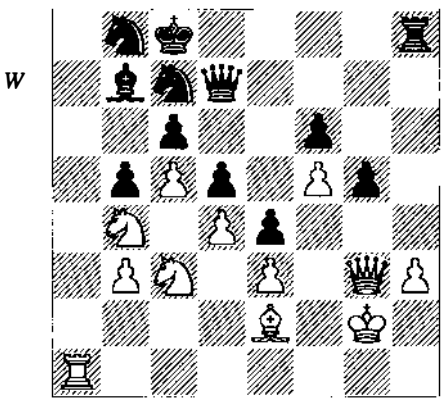
24...a4 25 ♗a5

This allows me to open the a-file but exchanging rooks is a mixed blessing because although it gives me a point of entry it also makes Black less congested.

25...♗b7 26 b3 axb3 27 axb3 ♔c8 28 ♘c3 ♗f8 29 ♘ge2

29 ♘a2 ♗e7 30 ♘b4 ♗d8 31 ♕e2 is also possible.

29...♗e7 30 ♕g3 ♗d8 31 ♖a2 ♘e8 32 ♗xd8 ♖xa2 33 ♘xa2 ♔xd8 34 ♘b4 ♔c8 35 ♘c3 ♘b8 36 ♖a1 ♘c7 37 ♗e2 ♕d7 *(D)*



With less than five minutes to reach the time-control, I wanted to play 38 ♖a7. The move felt completely right, but I was worried that I might get my rook trapped after ...♘ba6 and ...♔b8. I knew that would mean that I would have to sacrifice something and do so before I had time to see all the consequences. I told myself that I would still be a bit better if I didn't play 38 ♖a7 but I knew inside that I should play this move. And then it occurred to me that Korchnoi, whom I had played a few rounds previously, would play 38 ♖a7 without a second thought. So I played it, and waited for the follow-up to reveal itself.

38 ♖a7! ♘ba6

If Black 'passed' with a move like 38...♖h7 I was planning to bring my queen to b6: 39 ♕e1 ♘ba6 40 ♘xa6 ♘xa6 41 ♕a1 ♘c7 42 ♕a5, when Black still has major problems.

39 ♘cxd5!

39 ♘a4! is even stronger (e.g. 39...♔b8 40 ♘b6), but this seems less 'thematic' somehow – which means it's harder to see, not that it's inferior. In any case, there is no doubt that 38 ♖a7 was the right move. 39 ♘xb5 is also possible. However, for whatever reason, none of these moves were clear to me before I played 38 ♖a7.

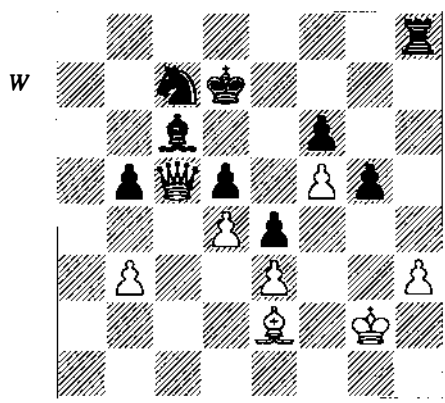
39...cxd5 40 c6 ♗xc6 41 ♘xa6 ♘xa6 42 ♖xd7 ♔xd7

At first I thought it would be relatively easy to win this position, but then I realized that I had no chance unless I could exchange my e2-bishop for the a6-knight. I saw this very lucidly, I believe, because of the lesson I learned from Rowson-Tyomkin, examined under 'Scope' earlier in this chapter.

43 ♕e1 ♘c7 44 ♕b4

44 ♕d1! is much simpler, intending ♗h5. I saw this move, but was still recovering from the time-scramble, and somehow felt that I could take my time.

44...♘a6 45 ♕a3 ♘c7 46 ♕c1 ♘e8 47 ♕c5 ♘c7 *(D)*



48 h4!

Now I either enter with my queen along the g-file or at f8.

48...gxh4

48...♖xh4 49 ♕f8 ♘e8 50 ♗h5! ♖xh5 51 ♕f7+. It's important to check that Black cannot

hold a fortress with his remaining pieces, but it seems that I can gradually enter with my king via b4.

49 ♔h3 ♘a6 50 ♕c1 ♘c7 51 ♕g1 ♘e8 52 ♕g6 ♔e7 53 ♗h5 ♗d7 54 ♕f7+ ♔d6 55 ♗g6 ♔c6

55...b4 56 ♔g2! h3+ 57 ♔h2 and it's still zugzwang.

56 ♕e7 ♘d6 57 ♕xf6 ♖a8 58 ♔xh4 ♖a3 59 ♕f8! ♖xb3 60 ♕a8+ ♔c7 61 ♕xd5 ♖c3

61...♖xe3 62 ♕c5+ ♗c6 63 d5.

62 f6 ♗c6 63 ♕e5 1-0

This game does illustrate the significance of having a spatial advantage, but I'm not sure it endorses the claims made by Liu Wenzhe. (I am sceptical of the idea of 'chess schools', so I will deal with Liu Wenzhe directly as an author, rather than 'The Chinese School' as a whole). Liu Wenzhe's point about Space is an intriguing one, but I suspect this is another example of what Hübner would call a category error, because Space sometimes matters and sometimes it doesn't. The *number* of squares you control is surely less important than *which* squares you control and the importance of which squares you control depends on the position. **As always, the truth in chess is captured not by some abstract principles but by the admission that 'it all depends'.** Granted, the more squares you control, the more likely you are to control the important ones. However, it does seem misleading to speak of a 'space principle'. Perhaps (and I am not being facetious when I say this) it makes more sense in Chinese than it does in English.

Controlling more territory than your opponent is usually a good thing and most strong players prefer to have more space than their opponents. However, one of the most common conflations in chess concerns space because 'more space' is often used synonymously with 'space advantage'. One does not logically entail the other. Having extra space can often be a burden and make you more vulnerable to counterattack. As Michael Stean highlighted in his wonderful book *Simple Chess*, **the pivotal issue with respect to Space is 'capacity'**. There are lots of ways to explain this with analogy. A holiday villa that might appear cramped for eight people could be ideal for four. This helps to explain why the side with less space tends to be happy to exchange pieces, but it doesn't capture the danger of having extra space, which is that having lots of territory to defend can make you vulnerable to a counterattack. In this respect Hitler's (arguably) misguided decision to fight a war on two fronts might be a better example. There are many chess examples to illustrate this point, but to keep this chapter in some sort of shape I give the following with fairly light notes.

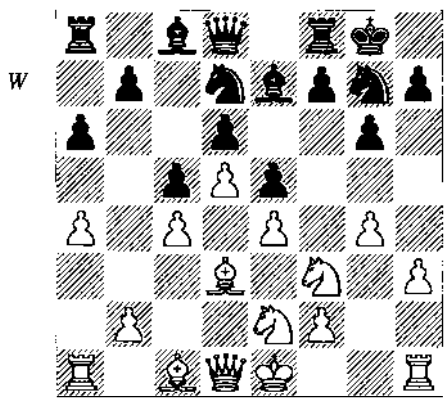
Lautier – Nisipeanu

French Ch, Noyon 2005

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 c5 3 d5 e5 4 ♘c3 d6 5 e4

Black's opening gifts White some space, but has the virtue of slowing the game down so that White's 'extra move' is not so keenly felt. White is better here, because the space does matter. However, some players handle space better than others, and as this game shows, if White loses control, Black's forces can rush into the space, repossess it, and cause a lot of trouble.

5...♗e7 6 ♘f3 0-0 7 h3 ♘bd7 8 ♗d3 a6 9 a4 ♘h5 10 ♘e2 g6 11 g4 ♘g7 *(D)*



White has more space in the centre, and this is likely to be a permanent feature of the position due to the locked central structure. White also has extra space on the queenside (a4 vs a6) and the kingside (g4 vs g6) but it remains to be

seen whether this extra space amounts to a 'space advantage'.

12 ♘g3 ♔h8 13 ♗e3

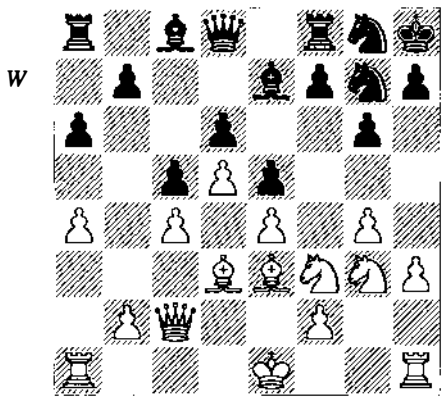
13 ♗d2!? would have been my preference, because when Black plays ...f5 I don't want to be forced to take twice. Moreover, if Black plays ...♘f6-g8 then White can play b4 without temporarily sacrificing a pawn.

13...♘f6 14 ♕c2

A little ponderous. 14 a5 speeds up the main agenda on the queenside before Black is ready to hit back with ...f5. However, 14...b5! is then possible, and probably correct. White has the option of 15 cxb5 axb5 16 b4. This looks good on the queenside, but White still doesn't have a safe square for his king.

14 ♕d2 ♘g8 15 b4 cxb4 16 ♕xb4 f5 is also not totally clear.

14...♘g8 *(D)*



Black appears to be grovelling on the seventh and eighth ranks, but Nisipeanu was no doubt aware that there is plenty of space in White's position that might one day be occupied by his pieces. I think White is still better here, but the position is very tense, mainly because there is no completely safe place for White's king, while Black's king is snug and safe on h8.

15 ♔e2?!

Although the king is probably safest in the centre, there was no need to surrender castling rights yet. White might still benefit from having the option of castling on either side.

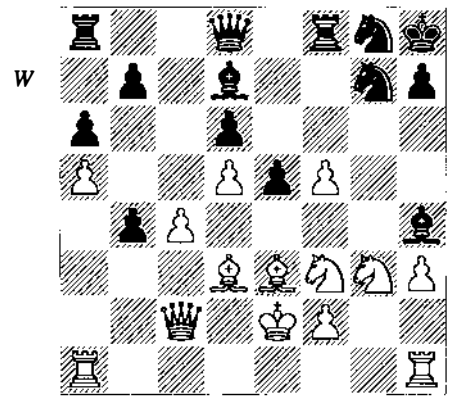
15...♗d7 16 b4?!

This seems too ambitious, but with all the pieces out and the rooks connected it does feel like the time to 'do something'. However, I am not sure what to suggest for White.

16 ♖ag1 looks a bit vague. White is not likely to generate a serious attack because Black has more than enough defenders on the kingside and can always counterattack with ...f5. Moreover, by deserting the queenside, White invites 16...b5!, when Black is at least OK.

16 ♘d2 would work well if Black played 16...f5, but instead Black can improve his position considerably with 16...♗g5, exchanging dark-squared bishops.

16...cxb4 17 a5 f5! 18 gxf5 gxf5 19 exf5 ♗h4! *(D)*



Black's pieces begin to wake up and White's king starts to feel uncomfortable.

20 ♘e4

20 ♘xh4 ♕xh4 21 ♕b1 is more testing.

20...♘xf5 21 ♖ag1 ♘f6?!

21...♗e7!, retaining an important defender, looks better and appears favourable for Black.

22 ♗b6 ♕e8 23 ♘xh4 ♘xh4 24 ♘xd6

Now it's very unclear again.

24...♕h5+ 25 ♔f1 ♖g8 26 ♗e2 ♖xg1+ 27 ♖xg1 ♗xh3+ 28 ♔e1 ♗g4 29 ♖xg4!

29 ♗xg4 is also possible. After 29...♘xg4 30 ♕e2 ♖g8 31 c5 Black has to find an answer to c6-c7-c8♕.

29...♘xg4 30 ♕e4 ♖g8 31 ♗c7?

An obtuse move. 31 ♗d8! is far more constructive, but of course the position is extremely random. 31...♖xd8? (31...♖g6 32 c5 ♔g8 keeps

the position highly unclear) 32 ♗xg4 is winning because the queen cannot find a square to stop ♘f7+.

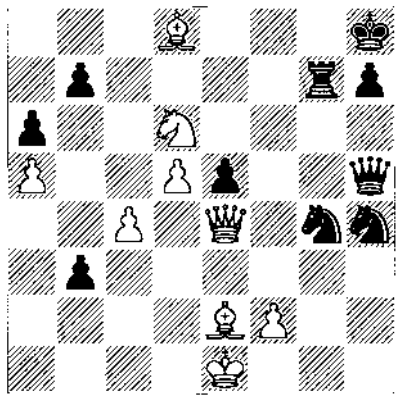
31...♖g7!

Gaining a vital tempo. No checks on e5 or f7 now.

32 ♗d8

Too late!

32...b3! *(D)*



White sacrificed a pawn when he seemed to have control, but now, when he has lost control, the pawn that he didn't get round to winning back comes back to haunt him.

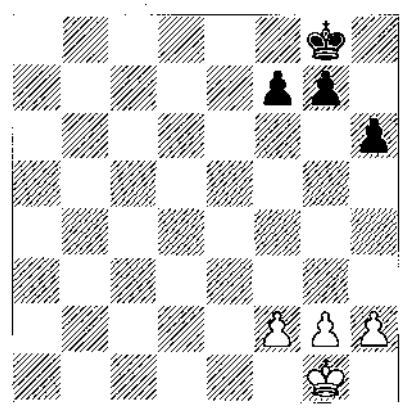
33 ♔d2 ♕h6+ 34 ♔c3 ♕xd6 35 ♗xh4 ♕a3 36 ♗d3 b2+ 37 ♔d2 ♕xa5+ 38 ♔e2 ♕b6 39 ♕f5 ♕g6 40 ♕f8+ ♖g8 41 ♕b4 ♕h5 42 ♗g3 ♘xf2+ 43 ♔xf2 ♕g5 0-1

So 'Space' is an important aspect of quality, but it's not easy to judge when having space is an asset, and when it is a liability. It seems to come down to *control* (see Chapter 6). If you can keep control of the position, having more space than your opponent is a good thing, but if you lose control, you might wish you had fewer squares to have to defend!

Safety

Don't try to be brave, when it is enough to be intelligent.
PAULO COELHO

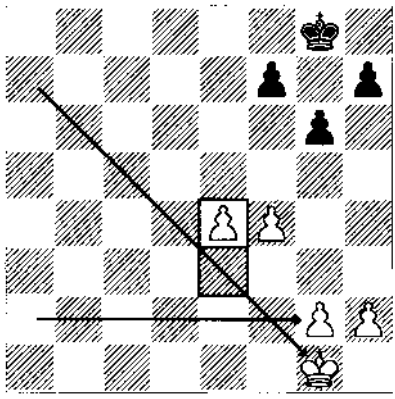
As I've matured as a player, I have become far more aware of the issue of safety, particularly king safety. Some of the moves that impress me most these days are those that show an appreciation for keeping the king safe from harm, long before there is any visible danger to the king.



This set-up with the king on g1 and the pawns on f2, g2 and h2 is extremely common. One of my first chess teachers in Aberdeen, whose name I forget, but whose voice and face I remember, told me something about this set-up that I will never forget. "You see, laddie", he began, and he went on in a broad Aberdonian dialect. "The way I see it is that the king is like your most precious jewel ("yer maste precious joowul"). And what would you do with your most precious jewel? You would keep it safe, wouldn't you? So I always think of the king as being in his box, if you know what I mean. You keep him safe in his box behind three pawns, and nobody is likely to find him! Of course, he sometimes gets a little claustrophobic, and needs a bit of air. If that happens, you just move one of the pawns, and give him a little air, *but not too many – one is usually enough*. Just enough to make him breathe more easily. Once you start making more pawn moves he really feels draughty, and doesn't like it. So here's my advice to ye, laddie: keep your king tucked up safe in his box, and you won't lose so many games!"

This was a great piece of advice, and I value it today as a GM, even though I believe the person who gave it to me was around 1300 playing strength, which seemed to me a very healthy rating when I was nine years old. In any case,

most decent players realize that they shouldn't lunge with their h- and g-pawns after they have castled kingside, but many players are far too trigger-happy with their f-pawns and don't realize the harm that moving their f-pawn can do to their king:

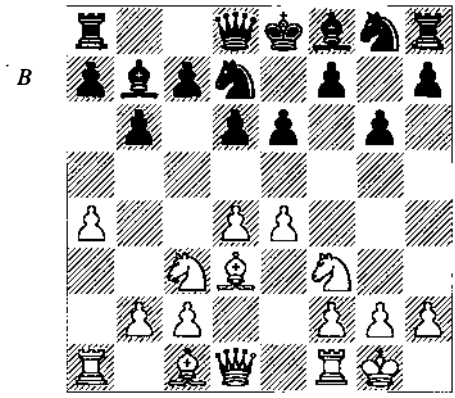


'The box' is open and the king feels the draught. In the diagram, we can see why playing f4 is a somewhat risky undertaking. It weakens the a7-g1 diagonal and the second rank. It also indirectly weakens a lot of squares. For instance g4 is weakened, because now g4 can only be covered with h3, but then g3 would be weakened, etc. I am not saying that f4 is always anti-positional, not at all. I am saying that it is highly committal, and that many a game has been lost because it was played too casually:

Shaw – A. Martin

British League (4NCL) 2004/5

1 e4 b6 2 d4 ♗b7 3 ♘c3 e6 4 ♘f3 d6 5 ♗d3 ♘d7 6 0-0 g6 7 a4 *(D)*



B

7...♗g7?

As I argue in Chapter 13, the Hippo is quite a decent opening. However, it cannot be played on autopilot. Black usually has to meet a4 with ...a6 and h4 with ...h6 in order to keep the rook's files closed. This is fairly typical of how you meet the advance of rook's pawns when you have fianchettoed. I am reminded of one of Nigel Short's annotations where he spoke of a move 'maintaining the integrity of the pawn-structure' and this is what Black doesn't manage to do here. Once the pawn lands on a5, Black's queenside structure is already compromised, because he will no longer be able to play ...c5 (an important break) without leaving weaknesses behind, and the threat of White playing a6 is annoying.

7...a5?! is almost always a mistake in this kind of position, primarily because Black loses flexibility and can no longer play ...c5 without a horrible weakening of the light squares (especially b5). The problem with 7...a5 is again a problem of 'integrity' in that the pawn has gone too far; it no longer supports the b-pawn's aspirations to go to b5 and it has also let down the c-pawn, which can no longer go to c5 without jeopardizing the whole position.

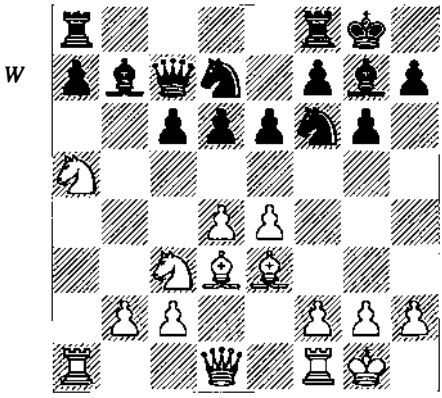
Black should play 7...a6! so that he controls b5 and is therefore ready to meet 8 a5? with 8...b5!, when Black is very comfortable and when he plays ...c5 White's pawn on a5 will look more like a weakness than a strength.

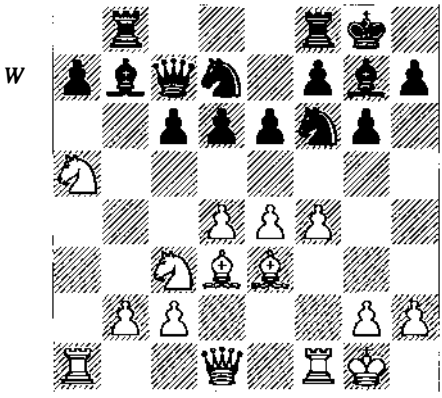
8 a5! bxa5

A big concession, but the a5-pawn was loitering with intent.

9 ♗e3 ♘gf6 10 ♘d2 0-0 11 ♘b3 c6 12 ♘xa5 ♕c7 *(D)*

By fairly simple means, White has built up a significant edge. In addition to damaging Black's structure, White can also net the bishop-pair. John Shaw's first thought now was that he should simply, and quickly (to keep pressure on the opponent in terms of Time), play 13 ♘xb7 ♕xb7 14 ♖a2. His next move would probably be ♕e2, followed by ♖fa1 and then he could invest some time to think of what to do with his





positional advantage. Black may well force him to react to something in the meantime, but he is well placed to deal with that. White's advantage may not be decisive in this case, but it is significant, enduring, and completely safe. Instead, John decided that he could play more ambitiously and increase his space advantage, and so he played:

13 f4?!

This was not a disastrous decision, but it gave Black some time to organize his position and, more to the point, it weakened White's position. This might seem a strong claim, because f4 does not look particularly weakening to most players. Yet it is, and, as we see in the game, it is a weakening that Black can exploit in the long term. Years of playing the Najdorf as Black has taught me that when White combines 0-0 and f4, he is inviting trouble for his king in the long term. Of course, it depends on the position, and it is often perfectly legitimate to try to attack Black in this way. However, my strong conviction is that most players who push their f-pawn at moments like this don't realize that it is a distinctly double-edged operation. I also believe that this comes out of a view of chess that over-eggs the joys of attacking and under-emphasizes defence and counter-attack.

13...♖ab8 *(D)*

14 ♕e2

14 ♘xb7 ♖xb7 no longer looks so troubling for Black. After 15 b3 c5 White is probably still better, but his position feels needlessly shaky.

14...♗a8 15 ♘b3

A sign that things have not gone to plan. The knight's *raison d'être* on a5 was to take the bishop on b7, not to block the b-file from b3. Now the a8-bishop also exerts indirect pressure on the weakened e4-pawn. White is still better, but there is lots of tension in the position and it is easy for White to go wrong.

15...c5

Beginning the counter-attack.

16 dxc5 dxc5 17 ♖a2?!

Only here does White begin to lose his advantage. He needed to follow up resolutely on his decision to play f4 by means of 17 e5!. Psychologically, it would have been hard to open up the a8-h1 diagonal for a bishop that could once have been taken. However, 17...♘d5 18 ♘b5! justifies White's play and yields some advantage. I don't think this detracts from my point about f4. I was not claiming that it was without merit, but that it was an impractical move, and a bad decision, given that there was a much safer alternative that was no less good.

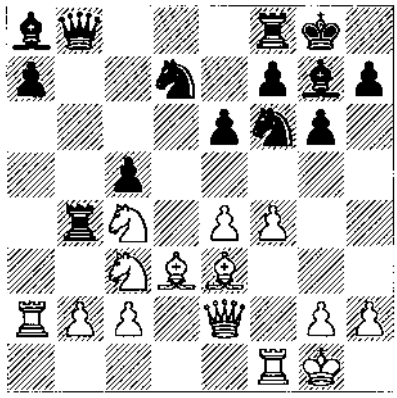
17...♖b4 18 ♘d2 ♕b8 19 ♘c4 *(D)*

It appears that White still has complete control of the position – an impression disturbed by Black's next move:

19...♘d5!!

Excellent! White can still be better after this move, but it is not easy to navigate through the tactics that have been introduced. In any case, I want to emphasize that such moves don't come out of nowhere – in this case, it comes as a direct result of White weakening his king's position with f4.

20 exd5 exd5 21 ♘xd5?



White should be better after 21 ♘e5! ♘xe5 22 fxe5, but following 22...c4!? there seems to be no obvious way to keep the position absolutely stable; e.g., 23 ♗c5 (23 ♗f5!? and 23 ♗xa7!? are both decent alternatives, but no less complicated) 23...cxd3 24 ♕xd3 ♗xe5 25 ♗xb4 ♕xb4 and in this particular case Black is not worse. Instead, 22...d4 23 ♗d2 dxc3 24 ♗xc3 is better for White. Black probably has to sacrifice material to stay in the game: 24...♗d5!? (24...♖b6 25 ♗c4 gives White complete control) 25 ♗xb4 cxb4 26 ♗c4 ♗xc4 27 ♕xc4 ♗xe5 with some drawing chances.

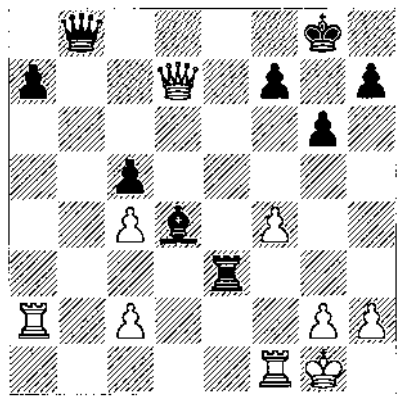
21...♗xd5 22 b3

John initially felt he had succeeded in consolidating the position, but the black pieces were not so easily appeased:

22...♖e8 23 ♕d2 ♗xc4 24 ♗xc4 ♖xc4! 25 ♕xd7

25 bxc4 ♖xe3 26 ♕xd7 ♗d4 is the same.

25...♖xe3 26 bxc4 ♗d4! *(D)*



Devastating. White is completely lost, and primarily because of the position of the f4-pawn.

27 ♔h1 ♕xf4! 28 ♖aa1 ♗xa1 29 ♖xa1 ♕xc4 30 ♕xa7 ♕xc2

And White resigned on move 54.

The following two examples show how my appreciation of safety has developed from my own games:

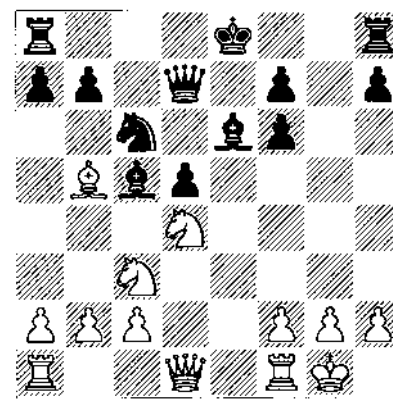
Rowson – T. Christensen

Politiken Cup, Copenhagen 1996

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 e6 3 d4 d5 4 exd5 exd5 5 ♗g5 ♘f6 6 ♗b5+ ♘c6 7 0-0 ♗e6 8 ♘c3 ♗e7 9 dxc5 ♗xc5?

9...0-0!.

10 ♗xf6 gxf6 11 ♘d4 ♕d7 *(D)*



What would you suggest for White here?

The opening has gone well and now I was looking for a way to build on my structural advantage. I was pleased with my decision here, but when I showed this game to some strong grandmasters after the game they were not convinced.

I played:

12 ♘a4?! ♗xd4

12...♗d6 is also playable.

13 ♗xc6 ♗xf2+ 14 ♖xf2 ♕xc6 15 ♕d4

I had thought this was a clever transformation, but I remember that Speelman and Hodgson were not so sure. They agreed that White is clearly better, but they felt I could have made

more of my position. They seemed strangely uncomfortable that White had lost his f2-pawn and felt that my king wasn't as safe as it should be. I found this hard to understand at the time (my king is perfectly safe, I have a dark-square blockade and an open f-file!) but now it makes more sense.

The f2-pawn might look unnecessary, but think of all the things it does: it can block the a8-h1 diagonal with f3. It can help White to block the g-file with g3. It prevents Black from parking any pieces on the e-file in the long term and it blocks the a7-g1 diagonal.

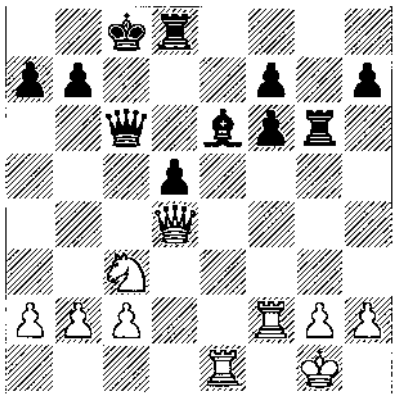
None of these functions seem essential at the moment, but the position will inevitably change and there will be at least one line where I would wish that I still had my f-pawn. In other words, by losing the f2-pawn my position loses a certain amount of quality; more precisely my position loses a certain amount of safety and this limits my range of effective options.

At the time, I remember asking Julian Hodgson: "Why do I need this pawn?" and rather than give the explanation above he just said: "Well it's a pawn ... and it helps to defend your king."

The game continued:

15...♖g8 16 ♖e1 ♖g6 17 ♘c3 0-0-0 *(D)*

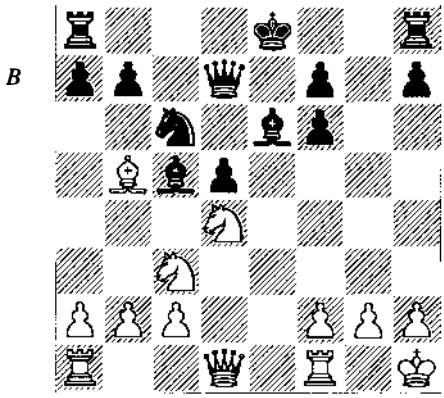
W



Now I felt I had to do something, because Black has ideas like ...♖dg8, ...h5, ...b6 and ...♕c5 – nothing terrifying but I was beginning to feel the loss of my f-pawn (although I didn't realize that *that* was what I was feeling), and my pieces seem to be optimally placed so this seemed a good moment to 'do' rather than 'be'. I decided to take the pawn on a7, but lost my dark-square blockade as a result. I was still a lot better, but Black did have counterchances. Eventually I won and took a share of the prize money for the first time in an international event, but it was needlessly nerve-wracking. Today I believe I would have played differently and won much more easily. I had thought I had played really well, so I was confused when the position became progressively murky.

After demonstrating my win, we went back to the position before 12 ♘a4 and scratched around a bit for an alternative until another watching GM, Artur Kogan, came up with 12 ♔h1!! *(D)*.

B



I believe this is by far the best move in the position. Moreover, it is a good example of a move that comes to mind when you make the effort of 'talking to your pieces' – in this case the king is clearly the least comfortable. This example illustrates the importance of 'information' in chess in that it is useful for me to know where Black will put his king before deciding where to put my pieces. 12 ♔h1 doesn't really concede any information to Black and I retain all the potential in my position to react appropriately to Black's next move. (If you are eager to know more about 'information' and 'potential', go to Chapter 13).

With the pieces as they stand, Black doesn't really want to castle either side. However, he does have a kind of threat of taking on d4, and when I take on c6 he can take on f2 with check.

This won't solve all his problems, but it will make his position easier to play.

Working backwards, if White doesn't want to lose the f2-pawn (at the time this didn't bother me, but now it would), and Black doesn't have another good move apart from ...♗xd4, ♔h1 is the ideal solution. It improves the position of the king and prevents Black's main threat. Black may not have to commit his king in response, but the only sensible waiting move, ...♖g8, is now much less effective because the king is much safer on h1 than g1!

Julian Hodgson was particularly impressed by 12 ♔h1 and asked Artur Kogan: "How did you come up with such a move?" Artur replied modestly: "It wasn't me, it was the Russian School!" Artur is originally from Ukraine rather than Russia, but he has since explained to me that almost all of his 'Russian schooling' was in Israel! There is certainly no lack of strong Russian-speaking players living there. However, I don't think we should dwell on the comment when the strength of the move speaks for itself.

If you are still not convinced, compare it to the alternatives. White has a good position, so many options seem promising, but Black's position should not be underestimated. The g-file is a source of counterplay and in the absence of a dark-squared bishop, White might find it hard to securely blockade the d4-square without inconvenience.

In any case, what can Black do after 12 ♔h1?

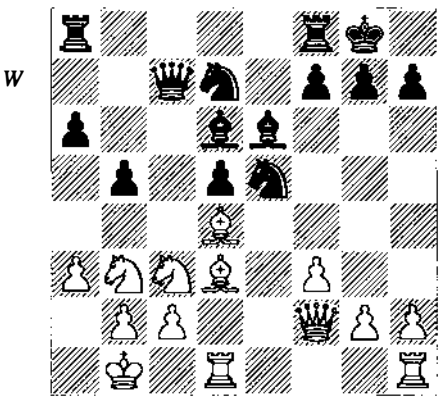
12...♗xd4? is obviously bad: 13 ♗xc6 bxc6 14 ♕xd4 is strategically winning for White.

12...a6 13 ♗xc6 bxc6 14 ♘a4 ♗a7 15 b4! with dark-square domination.

12...0-0-0 runs into an attack after 13 ♘a4 ♗d6 14 b4!?. White now threatens to get serious on the queenside and there is no counterplay in sight; e.g., 14...♕c7 15 ♗xc6 bxc6 16 ♕d2 (or 16 ♕d3) with complete control.

12...0-0 is probably best. White may not have a knockout blow now but Black would clearly rather not have his king on g8 and 13 ♘ce2!? leaves White with a very comfortable and safe advantage. This might make you think that 12 ♘ce2 was also good, but in that case the position is very different because then Black castles queenside and the knight on e2 cannot trouble the black king any time soon.

As an epilogue to this position, it is worth pointing out that in the context of safety, one of my proof-readers told me that before he read the explanation above, he wanted to play 12 ♔h1, but was ashamed to admit that his idea was to continue with 13 f4!



Rowson – Illescas
4 Nations Challenge, Girona 2003

I had played the first part of this game rather badly and Black already has the more comfortable position. He is beginning to cause some trouble on the queenside while my position is a little pointless. The most significant positional feature is not the IQP, but the relative safety of the kings. The half-open c-file and presence of the pawn on b5, combined with the fact that I have played a3, means that my king is not completely safe. Moreover, although Black cannot yet take on d3 and make use of the b1-h7 diagonal, this idea does linger in an unpleasant way. That said, I am not significantly worse, and if I pull myself together I shouldn't lose. By this stage I realized that I couldn't attack his king and I wanted to play solidly by centralizing my rooks with ♖he1 and then playing ♗f1, when I would threaten to take on e5 and d5, and might also have ideas of playing f4.

However, after 17 ♖he1 I saw the variation 17...♘xd3 18 ♖xd3 ♗xh2 (18...♖fc8 is also

possible, with perhaps a slight edge to Black) and I didn't like it. I felt uncomfortable about losing a pawn, and also didn't like the fact that he was now threatening ...♗g3, because I interpreted this to mean that he was 'winning a pawn with tempo'. This is a superficial thought in all sorts of ways, and it led me to play an inferior move and quickly lose the game.

After the game Illescas said that he would barely have considered taking the h-pawn. It's not that he felt it was unsound or that he would be mated afterwards, but just that it wasn't positionally or psychologically desirable. Even if it can be justified by analysis, White gets some initiative in return for a mere h-pawn and from a practical point of view, White is right back in the game. Black may win a pawn, but he would lose control. (A further point is that losing a rook's pawn is usually not nearly as serious as losing any other kind of pawn because the loss of a rook's pawn does not usually entail the loss of much quality. If you lose a b-pawn, your a- and c-pawns are likely to be weaker as a result, but if you lose an a-pawn, the b- and c-pawns are only marginally affected.)

I pressed him on this point, and he seemed to be saying that the extra pawn counts for much less than the compromised safety of Black's king and the fact that White would have a clear goal of attacking down the h-file.

This kind of judgement is similar to Aronian's in Rowson-Aronian above. Strong GMs seem to evaluate positions with an acquired sense of practical context. They often know or suspect that the objective assessment suggests one thing, while they willingly do another because they also know about the vicissitudes of practice. They are practical players in the sense that they are not slaves to the idea that they 'should' play in a certain way. They are just trying to win the game and know that the 'best' move is usually the one that they are most comfortable with.

In any case, my judgement about this line was superficial for several reasons. The main point is that after Black takes the pawn I begin by playing 19 ♖h1 – where the rook would now be correctly placed – so the whole idea of losing a tempo is irrelevant. After 19 ♖h1 (19 ♘e2 is also constructive) I felt that Black's king was in no particular danger but Illescas was right that this isn't really the point. It's not that I have immediate threats – it's just that it's not completely safe for Black, so although some material has been gained, the quality of Black's position is much less.

In any case, 17 ♖he1 was my best way to get back into the game. Instead I gradually lost the plot and after **17 ♕h4? ♘xd3 18 ♖xd3 ♖fc8 19 ♖e1?! a5 20 ♕g5 ♗f8! 21 ♕g3?! ♕b7** my position was already hopeless.

Psychology as a Fifth Dimension?

Given the emphasis I place on psychology, you might wonder why I don't think of chess as a game of 'five dimensions' with the fifth being the psychological dimension. What it comes down to is that I think chess is too psychological for psychology to merely be one dimension of five. As I've said before, thinking of chess as four-dimensional is just something that works for me, not something I think is uniquely true or persuasive. However, it is worth saying why I think psychology is relevant to every part of the game, rather than merely being one dimension of it.

The enduring fascination of chess lies in the complexities of the game matching the cravings of the human intellect. There is freedom to set sail in creative expression, but ideas are always anchored by logic. It is infinitely exacting, but it stretches without strain. Yet this snug and elastic 'fit' between chess and human beings is often taken for granted. We know what it is about *chess* that attracts us, but we don't often consider what it is about *us* that that leads us to be attracted to chess.

If asked to describe the game, I suspect most players would refer to 64 squares, 32 pieces, the rules, and perhaps the scoresheets and the clock. 'Chess psychology' would probably be mentioned too, but mainly with reference to certain competitive aspects of the game, with a good 'chess psychologist' being a player who

knows how to make their opponents uncomfortable and induce them into error. This is fine, as far as it goes, but the reason I think the game absorbs us so deeply is that 'chess psychology' is much broader than that.

To my way of thinking, the psychology of chess encompasses everything from the way we learn the moves, to the way we perceive the board, to the way we think about the game in relation to the rest of our lives. It also includes the way we assimilate opening and endgame theory, construct our own 'style', how we go about analysing our own games and much else besides. **It is the relationship between the possibilities of the game and the possibilities of our selves that constitutes chess's charm.** Thus it is misleading to think that psychology is merely an important *part* of chess, in the same way that Material or Opportunity are important parts, for this obscures the more penetrating idea that chess *is* a psychological game.

Therefore, the model that works for me is to think of players competing in four dimensions, and to acknowledge that this four-dimensional struggle is psychological through and through.

Conclusion:

All chess models have limitations, but I find that thinking of chess as a game of four dimensions does more good than harm.

These four dimensions are Material (the value of the pieces), Opportunity (initiative, ability to generate threats and carry out positional operations), Time (clock time, momentum) and Quality. Quality is the broadest category, and I think that most of 'quality' can be captured by the sub-categories of Structure, Scope, Space and Safety. Chess is too psychological for psychology to be merely one dimension of chess.

Finally, this model is merely something that helps me describe chess, and make sense of positions in a way that I find intellectually satisfying. I find it a valuable descriptive tool, but once again it is worth saying that it not supposed to be a practical instrument to apply directly during play.

8 Doing and Being

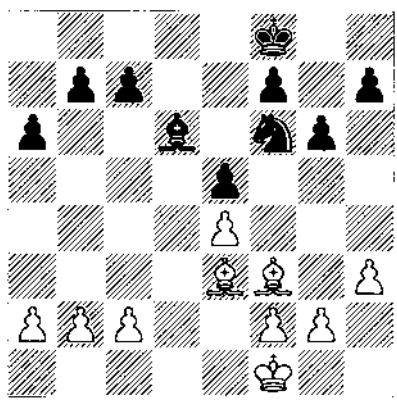
Search your heart and see.
The way to do is to be.
LAO TZU

Miles did very little in the following game, but it was enough to beat a seasoned grandmaster. He didn't exert any major effort in trying to do anything and there was no strain. He just kept playing decent moves and let his opponent do his work for him. This sort of approach is anathema to many players and this chapter is an attempt to change that.

Miles – Reinderman
Zonal, Escaldes 1998

1 d4 d6 2 e4 ♘f6 3 ♘c3 g6 4 ♘f3 ♗g7 5 ♗e2 0-0 6 0-0 ♗g4 7 ♗e3 ♘c6 8 ♕d2 e5 9 dxe5 dxe5 10 ♖ad1 ♕c8 11 ♕c1 ♖d8 12 ♖xd8+ ♕xd8 13 ♖d1 ♕f8 14 h3 ♗xf3 15 ♗xf3 ♖d8 16 ♘b5 ♖xd1+ 17 ♕xd1 ♕b8 18 ♕d3 a6 19 ♘c3 ♕d8 20 ♕xd8+ ♘xd8 21 ♘a4 ♘e6 22 ♘c5 ♘xc5 23 ♗xc5 ♗f8 24 ♗e3 ♗d6 25 ♔f1 ♔f8 *(D)*

W

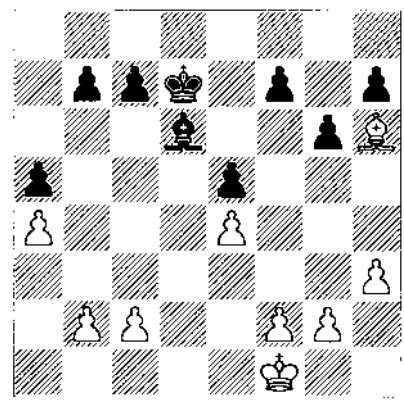


26 ♗g5 ♘d7 27 ♗g4 ♔e8 28 ♗h6

What does that last move do? I really don't know, but the vague and fairly inconsequential threat of ♗g7 provoked a mistake. This is not unusual – most players feel the need to do something in almost every position, and this often makes their position deteriorate. With the centre being closed, White's bishop-pair gives him a negligible advantage. However, Black seemed to get a bit nervous here, perhaps worrying about White playing ♗c8 when the d7-knight moves. In fact White is doing virtually nothing here and Black can quite comfortably continue with 28...♘c5 and now 29 ♗f3 looks best and gives Black various options, but White's advantage is minuscule. The sharper alternatives don't work: 29 b4 ♘xe4 30 ♗c8 b6 and White loses a pawn for not enough compensation; 29 ♗c8 ♔d8 and 29 f3 ♗f8! are also fine for Black.

28...a5? 29 ♗xd7+! ♔xd7 30 a4! *(D)*

B



Doing 'nothing' has yielded White a small positional plus. Notice that Miles waited for Black to put the pawn on a5 before taking on d7. Now Black will have some difficulties holding the position, because White has the pawn-break c3 and b4 in the long run and White's king has a secure square on c4.

30...f5?!

Black should have considered 30...c6 intending ...b5 to keep White's king away from c4. In

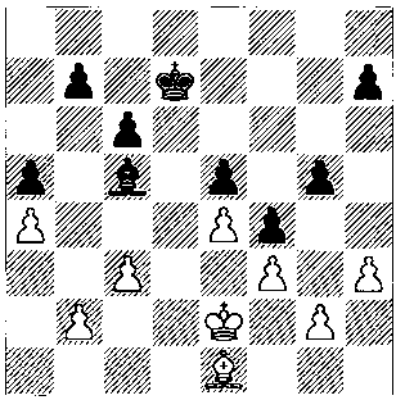
that case White would play 31 ♔e2 b5 32 b3 and then follow up with ♔d3 and try to play c4, probably after taking on b5. However, if Black is careful and doesn't gift the white king the c4-square, I don't think White can win.

31 ♗d2 ♗b4 32 c3 ♗c5 33 f3 f4?!

I'm not sure if this is a mistake, because it doesn't change the fact that e5 is a weakness. However, 33...fxe4 34 fxe4 c6 would have been my choice.

34 ♔e2 c6 35 ♗e1 g5? *(D)*

W



A pointless move, but with his pawn on f4 perhaps Reinderman was trapped in a kind of King's Indian narrative where Black attacks on the kingside (see Chapter 3).

36 h4 h6?

Black has gifted White targets on the kingside. 36...gxh4 is better. The fact that the h7-pawn is isolated is less important than the fact that White's bishop can't attack it.

37 b4 axb4 38 cxb4 ♗d4 39 a5!?

39 b5? cxb5 40 axb5 ♔d6 is problematic for White.

39 h5? b5! keeps the white king out.

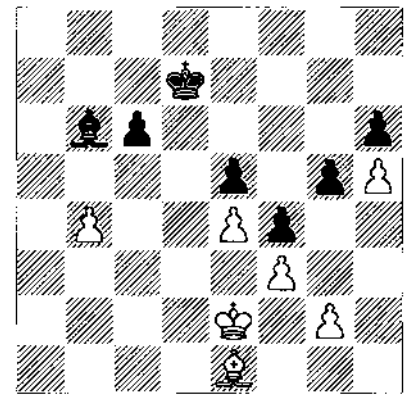
39...b5 40 axb6 ♗xb6 41 h5! *(D)*

White's advantage now looks quite significant: the e5- and h6-pawns are genuine targets.

41...♔e6 42 ♔d3 ♗d4 43 ♔c4 ♗e3 44 b5 cxb5+ 45 ♔xb5 ♗c1 46 ♔c6 ♗b2 47 ♗b4 g4 48 fxg4 ♔f6 49 ♔d5 ♔g5 50 ♗d6 ♔xg4 51 ♗xe5 ♗c1 52 ♔e6 ♔g5 53 ♗c3 ♔g4

53...♔xh5 54 ♔f5 shoulders out the black king.

B



54 ♗e1 ♗b2 55 e5 ♗a3 56 ♗d2 ♗b2 57 ♔d6 f3 58 gxf3+ ♔xf3 59 e6 ♔g4 60 ♔d7 ♗a3 61 ♗xh6 1-0

After 61...♔xh5 62 ♗f4 followed by ♗d6 White wins easily.

On being asked about this game, Tony Miles commented:

"I did absolutely **** all and it proved to be enough!"

This comment might seem a bit shocking, but you have to admit that it's also quite funny. The point is that Black lost the game; White didn't really win it. One reaction would be to think "So what? Sometimes you get lucky and your opponent makes it easy for you", but I think there is more to it than that.

It is well-known that part of being a strong player is making other strong players look weak. Take Kasparov against your average 2600 GM or your average 2600 against your standard IM, and so on. At every level of play, players who look good against weaker players are, in turn, made to look weak – nothing new there. But I believe part of the reason for this is that the stronger you get, the finer your feeling for the game and the more acutely you sense mistakes. More precisely, as you get better, you get better at avoiding mistakes, but you also come to realize how difficult it is to avoid them, so you develop a better sense of how to make your opponents go astray. Improving your results is thus not just about playing better moves yourself, but encouraging, or even just *allowing* your opponent to make mistakes. What the above

game suggests is that you don't always have to try very hard to do that! Moreover, sometimes trying hard is actually counter-productive.

I would like to give a little philosophical background to shed light on this issue.

Chess and Taoism

The underlying western assumption is that the world is rigid and will not change unless we act upon it. Great change requires us to expend great effort. The underlying Taoist assumption, however, is that the world is constantly changing, and that by exerting our efforts wisely we can influence this evolving change with minimal effort. The Taoist view is that when we do not feel tired, we have been efficient in impacting the world.
KRIPPENDORF

There are two Taoist concepts that might help you to appreciate 'Being' in chess. The first is the well-known but widely misunderstood *Yin-Yang* polarity and the second is *Wu-Wei*, which can be loosely translated as 'letting things happen'.

Taoists conceive of the world as an ongoing interplay of two expressions of the same cosmic energy (Chi). 'Yin' refers to the receptive, the yielding, the adaptive expression of this energy, while 'Yang' refers to the active, creative and productive aspects. It is important to grasp that they are not in opposition. When a western mind comes across two things, our first instinct is to think of a duality, i.e. to think that the two things are completely different and separate from each other. Yin and Yang are not like that at all. The Yin-Yang polarity is called a polarity because, at a conceptual level, the poles are the end points of the same stuff. All that takes place between the poles is both Yin and Yang – neither can exist independent of the other. Energy can be expressed in ways that is closer to Yang or to Yin, but never exclusively one or the other.

The relevance to chess is that **I think most players place far too much emphasis on the Yang aspects of playing – doing things, being creative, making things happen – rather than the Yin aspects – being adaptive, letting things happen, absorbing pressure, taking it easy.**

Most games have phases that require shifting between modes of Yin and Yang; for instance, you might unleash a devastating attack and calculate very concretely, but the result might be the win of a pawn at the cost of allowing some counterplay. Then if you continue in a relatively 'Yangish' mindset you will cause yourself problems; you have to ease off the gas and change your approach. However, in neither case should you be single-minded. When you are calculating variations and making things happen, you are still mindful of your pawn-structure and your king safety, and when you are trying to out-manoeuvre your opponent, you should still have your eye out for concrete solutions.

'Wu-Wei' builds on this understanding. Very crudely it means 'non-action' or 'doing nothing' but the meaning is closer to something like 'swimming with the current'. It is not about being passive or slothful or lazy but rather about understanding your situation well enough that your actions arise spontaneously from the situation. In this sense it is more like 'not-trying' or 'not-straining'. It's about allowing things to take their natural course rather than dictating terms and trying to force them on any given situation.

According to Alan Watts, one of the main interpreters of eastern philosophy for westerners, Wu-Wei is "a form of intelligence, i.e. of knowing the principles, structures and trends of human and natural affairs so well that one uses the least amount of energy in dealing with them". At his peak, Karpov seemed to exemplify this kind of intelligence. Indeed, Icelandic GM Hjartarson once described the experience of playing Karpov as follows: "Nothing happens, but you lose." Karpov has such a fine feeling for the coordination of the pieces that with a few delicate touches in the right places he could make his opponent's position collapse, when it had previously looked quite viable. Moreover, in the notes to one of his games against Kasparov, where he has the advantage but is exploiting it in a leisurely way he writes: "Why

hurry? Why worry? The fruit will ripen of its own accord". A Taoist could not have put it any better!

To make a firm link between Taoism and chess requires a deeper exploration than I can offer here, but I genuinely believe that some appreciation of these aspects of Taoism could enhance your enjoyment of chess, and improve your play more generally. I have chosen the following game to illustrate the mistake of 'doing' when 'being' is enough. I watched most of the game and also analysed with the victor afterwards.

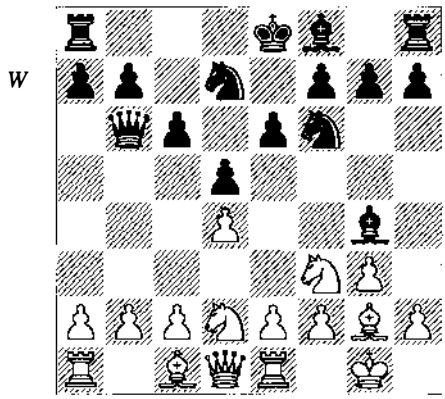
Motwani – A. Ledger

British Ch, Scarborough 2004

1 ♘f3 d5 2 g3 c6

Many people like to play this solid move, which keeps many of Black's options open. However, I believe it is strictly unnecessary. Moreover, against the system employed in the game, the tempo saved can be very important; e.g., 2...♗g4 3 ♗g2 ♘d7 4 d4 e6 5 0-0 ♘gf6 6 ♘bd2 ♗e7 7 ♖e1 0-0 8 e4 c5! and Black is very comfortable.

3 ♗g2 ♗g4 4 0-0 e6 5 d4 ♘d7 6 ♘bd2 ♘gf6 7 ♖e1 ♕b6!? *(D)*



Directed against the immediate e4 (when Black takes on f3) but otherwise a little artificial.

8 c3 ♗e7 9 e4 dxe4 10 ♘xe4 0-0 11 a4 ♘xe4?!

11...a5 is a move that in general I think Black should play. While it is true that this makes Black's main pawn-break ...c5 more problematic due to the weakness of b5, this is a relatively small problem compared to the space White gains in the game. Moreover, playing a4 also has a drawback for White because whenever c4 is played, b4 will be weakened.

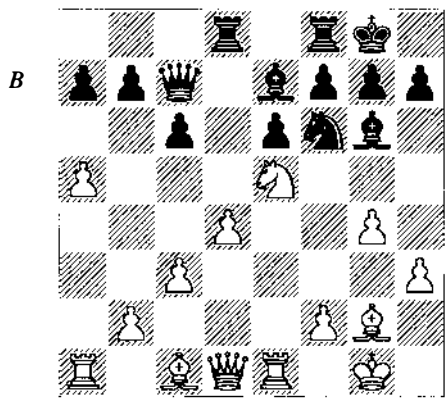
12 ♖xe4 ♘f6 13 a5!

Black may have forgotten that White didn't have to retreat the rook but could instead insert this important move.

13...♕c7 14 ♖e1 ♖ad8 15 h3 ♗h5

15...♗xf3 16 ♕xf3 a6 is probably more reliable – Black is worse here but allowing g4 and the doubling of the kingside pawns probably favours White.

16 g4 ♗g6 17 ♘e5 *(D)*



17...♘d7?!

This was the last chance for Black to contest White's space advantage and he should have taken it by 17...c5!, when I don't see a clear continuation for White. After 18 ♗f4 ♗d6 19 ♕b3 cxd4 20 cxd4 ♘d5! Black can soak up the pressure.

18 ♘xg6 hxg6 19 ♕f3

19 a6 b5! is not so clear because Black has the b6-square for his knight. It is better for White to keep a6 as a threat.

19...a6

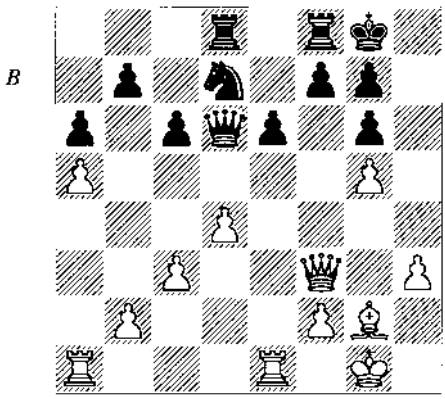
In general, the 'two bishops' are usually only an asset if you can demonstrate the strength of the bishop without the counterpart. It therefore makes sense for Black to place most of his pawns on light squares, where they restrict the unopposed bishop. However, the drawback of

this approach is that once the pawns are fixed on light squares, they will be vulnerable to the same bishop if the position ever opens up. In any case, Paul now finds a strong series of moves to increase his advantage.

20 ♗f4! ♗d6 21 ♗xd6 ♕xd6

When you have the two bishops, you should usually be very careful about when you exchange one of them and only do so when you have a clear follow-up in mind.

22 g5! *(D)*



An excellent move, and all the more so for looking a little odd. Paul is simply playing against Black's knight, which now has no convincing way to get into play. Meanwhile, White has plans to attack on both sides of the board, thus showing the superiority of the bishop over the knight. Note that White's bishop is restricted by Black's pawn-chain, but it is still an excellent piece by virtue of the fact that it discourages all of Black's freeing pawn-breaks.

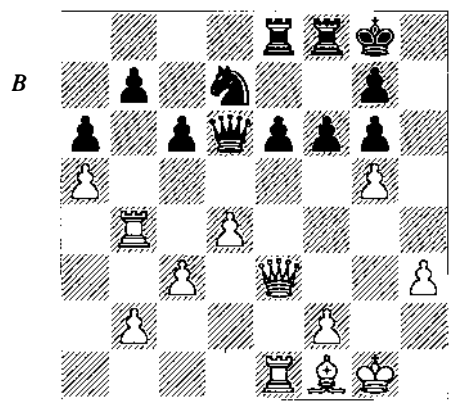
22...f6

Black resigns himself to a statically inferior position. It would be much better to make the ...e5 pawn-break work, but even here White seems to keep a firm grip on the position: 22...e5 23 ♕g3 leaves Black with many difficult problems to solve. The pawn sacrifice 23...♖fe8 (23...♖de8!? 24 ♖ad1 ♕b8 is also worth considering) 24 ♖ad1 ♕b8 25 dxe5 ♘c5 feels reasonable to me, but it merely transforms the advantage from a positional one to a material one. However, I would always opt for the variation that would be least pleasant for the opponent and the fact the knight will be quite active on e6 is probably worth the sacrificed pawn. After 26 b4 ♘e6 27 f4 ♖xd1 28 ♖xd1 ♖d8 I am not doubting that White is clearly better, but was he not already clearly better? White is now a healthy pawn up, but at least Black has healthy pieces. **I strongly believe that your practical results will improve once you are more willing to sacrifice material – not for attack (we can all do that) but for defensive and psychological reasons.**

23 ♗f1

23 ♕g3 ♕xg3 24 fxg3 e5 25 d5 is also very strong.

23...♕d5 24 ♕e3 ♖de8 25 ♖a4! ♕d6 26 ♖b4! *(D)*



White is already winning. The two weaknesses on b7 and g6 bring out the difference in strength between the far-sighted bishop and the myopic knight on d7.

26...fxg5 27 ♖xb7

That's a **huge** pawn to win and now all of Black's remaining pawns are weak. The only slight problem for White is that his king lacks a pawn-shield. This means that a queen exchange should be strategically decisive. Many players would get this far but the key is not to attach too strongly to the idea of swapping queens. It may be desirable, but that doesn't make it essential. Nor is it the only idea in the position. Use it to structure your thoughts by all means, but be aware that it is fine if your position develops and improves in some other way. Indeed, it is quite likely that Black might be willing to make

some other compromise in order to avoid a queen swap. This is the sort of attitude I am referring to in Chapter 6 when I encourage readers to be more protean in their play.

27...♖f5 28 ♗d3?

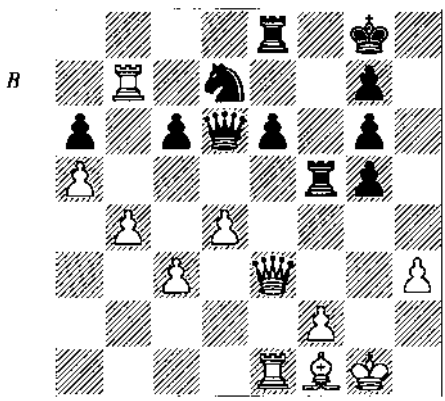
Until now Paul has played extremely well and this is his first mistake of the game. It is a big mistake and a rather instructive one. After the game Paul explained that around here he was looking for a 'solution' – a way to finish the game. He was trying to 'do' something. But he doesn't really have to 'do' anything! He just has to play some sensible moves here – and Black will run out of effective ideas. I suspect most players would try to do something here, but in this case Paul ends up spoiling his position and giving himself several hours of hard work. This is sad, because the hard work has already been done. There is a line from a Josh Ritter song: "Now my work is done, I feel I'm owed some joy" – this should be the case here. A well-played opening, a deep and deadly pawn move (22 g5) and a creative rook manoeuvre have given Paul a decisive advantage.

I should say here that I know Paul very well. He is a good grandmaster, rated around 2550 FIDE at the time of this game, and he has many major scalps to his name, including Michael Adams and Ivan Sokolov. Moreover, Paul used to teach me when I was younger. I know, as well as anyone, that in certain positions Paul can be absolutely deadly. When the position requires concrete calculation, and logical problem-solving, Paul is extremely strong, perhaps even world-class. However, by his own admission, Paul has developed as a player who thrives on a certain way of playing and is attracted to certain types of ideas. In particular, he loves to attack, and to have the initiative. He is by no means limited to this, but in any given position, he cannot help but begin by thinking in a certain way.

In this case, his mind was drawn to the idea of having his bishop on g6 (with tempo on the e8-rook) because this is a kind of mating-net, and then he saw some lines where he might be able to win the g5-pawn or give a check on the back rank. So he framed his advantage in terms of all the things he could do to his opponent – all the threats he could make, the things he could attack, etc. He thus thought of his advantage primarily in terms of opportunity – along the model: I attack this, he has to do this, then I can do that, and then it looks like it will be hard for him to stop that, etc. This is absolutely normal, and in many cases the best way to think, but in this case it was not called for.

When I first saw this position, I felt that White's advantage was primarily a question of quality. Black's damaged kingside and broken queenside make me think not in terms of changing the position, but rather in terms of stabilizing it. By just keeping things more or less as they are, the position, by its own accord, will change in White's favour. In other words White doesn't have to 'do' anything; he just needs to 'be' – to keep things as they are. This may seem a bit paradoxical, because you obviously need to change the position in some way before Black resigns. However, the point is that change is virtually unavoidable in chess, and helpful transformations often arise from gentle and unobtrusive moves.

In the given instance the a5-pawn is a huge asset, so I would be keen to keep that. 28 b4! *(D)* is the move to do this.

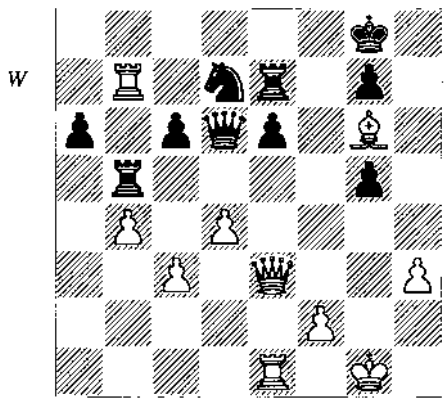


Paul saw this but then wasn't sure what he would do after 28...♘f6, when it seems, at a casual glance, as if Black might be fighting back. The pending attack on f2 is annoying and ...♘d5 might cause some turbulence. It seems that White has lost the initiative. Yes he has! But he doesn't need it any more! His initiative

already gave him a winning position. Now as long as the opponent's initiative doesn't put his gains in doubt, the opponent is welcome to it, for a move or two at least.

This may all sound a bit flippant, but I am trying to emphasize that creating threats and 'doing' things is only part of the equation – sometimes you should stop doing things for a few moves, or even let your opponent do things for you. In this case, White can play 29 ♕g3!. This really puts the result beyond doubt because Black cannot afford to exchange queens but has no other active possibilities. As soon as Paul saw this move he realized that this is what he should have done. But the thing is that 29 ♕g3 does not attack Black – it does not contain any tricks. Indeed 29 ♕g3 is much more about 'being' than 'doing'. There is nothing hidden: nothing Paul is seeing is beyond his opponent – it is all very simple and transparent.

28...♖xa5 29 ♗xg6 ♖e7 30 b4 ♖b5 *(D)*



31 ♖xb5?

Another very bad decision. On the one hand this wins a pawn, and this seems a reasonable reward for the positional pressure White has been building. However, viewed from the plural perspective of material, quality and opportunity, this is equivalent to blundering at least a pawn. Firstly, Black's rook on b5 is very clumsy, and the pawns on c6 and a6 are very weak. This move massively improves Black's position because White's extra pawn does not reduce the quality of Black's pieces. Indeed, White's c-pawn now becomes a little weak in some lines. Finally, the white rook on the seventh rank is excellently placed and should not be too readily exchanged – much better to exchange it for the important defender on e7 than the rickety castle on b5.

Thus White moves from being strongly ahead on quality to be being marginally ahead in material in an otherwise fairly unclear position. Being a pawn ahead is not a small issue, and White is probably still winning, but it is now very difficult to turn the advantage into a point, in a way it wasn't before. There were two motivations for Paul's decision – to make his advantage more tangible – and, by removing a rook, to play for mating tricks based on the bishop on g6. Paul was still thinking primarily in terms of checkmate!

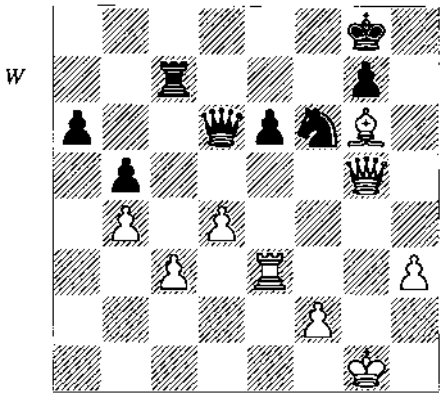
White is completely winning after 31 ♖a7! ♘f8 32 ♖xe7 ♕xe7 33 ♗d3 – there is no hope for Black. This was evident to Paul after he saw 33 ♗d3, but before seeing 33 ♗d3 it seemed to him that he had nothing particularly clear. It is made even clearer by the trick 33...♖b6 34 d5!. This is incidental though, and in no way an essential part of the decision to play 31 ♖a7.

31...cxb5!

Better than 31...axb5 32 ♖a1 with new prospects for the rook. Paul may not have expected this, but it is normal to recapture towards the centre, and I'm sure the prospect of this line was partly responsible for the decision to take on b5. It is good to be aware of this tendency: when you play a move that gives your opponent a choice, and you know that if he makes the wrong choice you are doing very well, but if he makes the right choice it's not so clear. When we are in good form, we normally expect our opponents to make the best moves and feel pleasantly surprised when they don't. However, when we feel under pressure, there is often a tendency to try to reduce this pressure by playing a move and hoping that the opponent will get it wrong – thus making it their role to take our tension away, rather than dealing with it ourselves!

32 ♕xg5 ♘f6 33 ♖e3 ♖c7 *(D)*

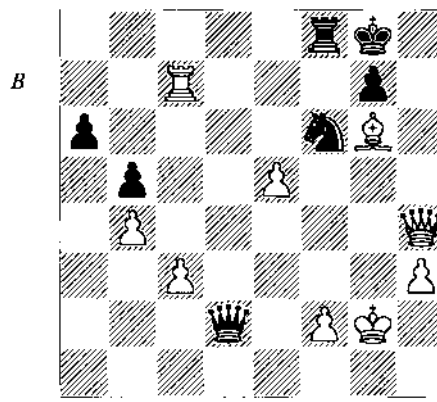
Now White has to win all over again. It is still a decisive advantage, but the irony is that now White really does have to do something in



order to win! Both sides have bad positions in a sense, and even though White is a pawn up and has much less to worry about, Black's position is now quite organized. Moreover, White's extra pawn can be thought of as the h-pawn (when you are a pawn down, it is often helpful to think in this way – it can make being a pawn down more bearable – although sometimes, when the extra pawn is about to become a queen, it might not be so encouraging...) which is useful for protecting the king at the moment but is unlikely to become a passed pawn any time soon. There are many further adventures in this game, but I give only light notes because the most instructive moments have passed. I watched this game last about six hours and saw how much pressure Paul was under to win a game that should have been allowed to win itself.

34 ♖g3 ♕d5 35 ♕f4 ♖c8 36 ♖g5 ♕b3 37 ♖c5 ♖f8 38 ♕h4 ♕d1+ 39 ♔g2 ♕d2 40 ♖c7 e5! 41 ♗f5 ♖e8 42 ♗g6 ♖f8 43 dxe5 *(D)*

Paul offers the following thoughts on this position: "After reaching the time-control at move 40 with little time to spare, I tried to calmly regain my composure, but I was still troubled by a strong feeling that somehow I was missing easier, cleaner ways to wrap up the game. I always try to respect and never underestimate anyone – and especially not an opponent as strong and resourceful as IM Andrew Ledger is – but in my heart I still really felt that I *ought* to be able to win well, and perhaps even quickly in some forceful way, from the current position. Instead, I became more tired and tense as I got my mind tied in confused knots analysing the variation 43 ♕g3 ♕h6 44 dxe5 ♘d5 45 ♖c6 ♘f4+ 46 ♔h2 ♘e2, when I probably panicked after visualizing 47 ♕e3 ♕h4. The cool response 48 ♔h1! offered later by my computer is very instructive for me. It's a powerful reminder that in situations where the position ought to be winning, but where the opponent is rightly fighting on tenaciously using all of his/her skill and resourcefulness, perhaps only a very simple, calm move may be required to end the resistance. Indeed, everything suddenly felt crystal-clear to me with no more nagging doubts when my computer gave the possible continuation 48...♘f4 (48...♖xf2 allows a quick mate starting with 49 ♖c8+ ♖f8 50 ♖xf8+ ♔xf8 51 ♕c5+) 49 ♕g3! (back there again – such moves, though apparently simple and obvious, are sometimes difficult for me!)."

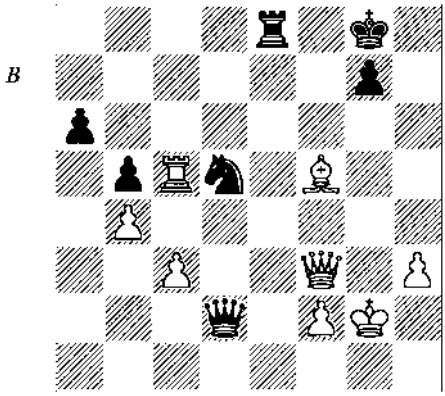


43...♕d5+ 44 ♔g1 ♕xe5 45 ♕g3 ♕e1+ 46 ♔g2 ♔h8! 47 ♖a7 ♕e6 48 ♕h4+ ♔g8 49 ♕g3 ♔h8 50 ♖c7 ♕d5+ 51 ♔h2 ♕d2 52 ♖c5 ♔g8 53 ♗f5 ♖e8 54 ♔g2 ♘d5 55 ♕f3 *(D)*

55...♘f4+?!

With a draw offer, but Black should have been more resolute in heading for the draw. In this move one detects the hope that Black might still win. In the last few years I have learned that when you are worse, and you decide that a draw is a good result, it is usually a good idea to go resolutely for that result, rather than push your luck when the evidence suggests that it is probably not your lucky day.

55...♘e3+ 56 ♔h2 ♕d6+ 57 ♔g1 ♘xf5 58 ♕xf5 ♖f8 gives excellent drawing chances.



56 ♔h2 ♕d6 57 ♕g3 ♖e2?

Pseudo-activity – again the problem of trying to do something when merely being was preferable. 57...♖f8, with the aim of keeping the knight firmly placed on f4, seems better. Then White might have to exchange rooks to make progress: 58 ♖c8!? ♖xc8 59 ♗xc8 ♕f6 60 ♗xa6 ♘e2, when Black has excellent drawing chances.

58 ♗g4 ♖e4 59 ♗f3 ♖c4 60 ♗d5+

The game was now approaching its seventh hour and Black was shocked into resignation. However, in the final position Black can and should fight on with 60...♕xd5 61 ♖xd5 ♘xd5, when he has reasonable chances of constructing a fortress.

1-0

Modes of Being

When you try to stop doing to achieve being, this very effort fills you with doing
SENG-T'SAN

Readers familiar with the idea of 'plus equals mode' (covered under *Wanting* in *7DCS*) might think of 'Being' as similar, but in fact 'Being' applies to all positions and stems from an appreciation of quality. However, I admit that the idea of just 'being' is a little abstract, so the following should hopefully help to flesh it out a bit.

In *The Road to Chess Improvement*, Yermolinsky refers to the **'spit and polish'** style of play, while I once heard Michael Adams's ability in IQP positions described as **'running on the spot'**. Another expression that captures the idea of 'Being' is **'keeping it between the hedges'**. In Northern Ireland this expression, "Just keep it between the hedges", is based on advice given to motorists on some country roads not to worry too much about the exact position of the car, as long as you don't bump into anything on either side! I am not claiming that this capacity to 'keep it between the hedges' is a style to aspire to, but I do think it is something to be aware of. I have seen thousands of chess games lost through players trying too hard to do something when it would have been enough to keep things roughly on the straight and narrow.

Why is the Threat Stronger than its Execution?

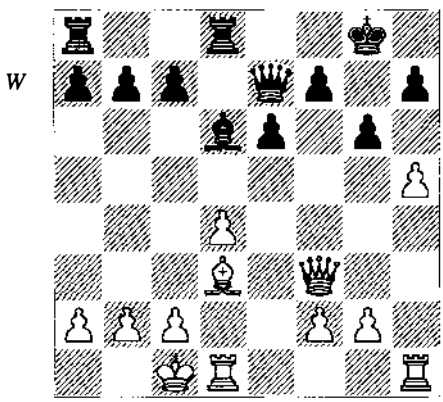
This question seems pertinent in the context of a discussion of Being because 'being' often means not enacting your threats, but keeping them for later when you think they will be more effective. However, I must admit that the meaning of the familiar maxim was never self-evident to me. In chess, I think the heart of the matter is that 'the threat' is never just a single threat in isolation, and the nature of the threat changes slightly as the position changes. In a recent lesson with a student I tried to explain this idea analogously:

The basic idea is that the player who has the threat has two advantages: the threat and the choice of when the threat will be executed, while when it is executed he has only the consequences of the executed threat, which may amount to less than those two advantages together. So the key question becomes: why is having knowledge of the timing important? And the answer seems to be that choice is a kind of advantage in and of itself.

If you imagine a stand-off between two people with the script that one of them has the right to hit the other anywhere at any time, while the other can try to block the punch when it comes. Before the punch, the puncher can think of a hundred different things including where and

when the punch will be most effective. Meanwhile the other guy cannot just do nothing because he needs to be fully ready for the threat. However, there is always more than a single threat in the equation, so at some point he will almost inevitably compromise his position and then the punch becomes stronger than it might have been originally. For instance, he will doubtless be moving and putting his body into certain positions, some of which are more vulnerable than others. The very existence of the threat undermines him, first of all on a psychological level because it creates fear and therefore nerves, but also in a purely physical sense because his choices are limited. As long as the other guy can punch him, he has to remain vigilant and this means that he can't make certain moves like turning his back, bending down, etc. As soon as the punch is landed, he can try to absorb the blow and fight back, but very often the existence of the threat keeps him on the defensive and so he cannot gather himself together and make full use of his resources.

The following example from one of my own games helps to highlight the value of retaining the threat and thereby inducing concessions.



B. Lalić – Rowson
London 1997

White's plan is to open the h-file and attack my king by doubling his rooks there. Bogdan tried to implement this plan but nothing came of it:

17 hxg6?!

A perfectly natural move, opening the h-file and planning to use it to attack my king. However, this relieves the tension prematurely and it would have been much better to build up on the h-file before releasing the tension. White should start with 17 ♔b1!, which is a useful move, directed against checks on the h6-c1 diagonal. Then after 17...♔g7 18 ♖h3 c6 19 ♖dh1 ♖h8 White cannot deliver mate on the h-file, but Black has been forced to put his rook on h8 to deal with the possibility. Now White should change track by 20 c4!, when the idea is no longer to open the h-file but instead to play h6+, disturb the coordination between Black's rooks and then open the centre with d5. Black is by no means lost, but this approach would place him under serious pressure. By contrast, in the game I had no problems because I could deal with the threat once it had been executed without compromising my position.

17...hxg6 18 ♔b1

18 ♕xb7 looks risky, but after 18...♖ab8 19 ♕f3 ♖xb2?, White has 20 ♗xg6! and probably emerges better. Instead, 18...♗f4+ seems to force a draw: 19 ♔b1 ♖ab8 20 ♕xa7 ♖xb2+ 21 ♔xb2 ♕b4+, etc.

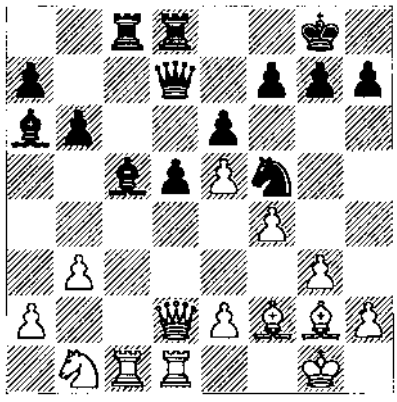
18...♔g7 19 ♖h3 c6 20 ♖dh1 ½-½

Bogdan offered a draw because after 20...♖h8 there is no danger on the h-file and my coordination is fine.

Keeping the Tension

In *7DCS* I introduced the concept of 'tension transference' which referred to our tendency to feel positional tension at a psychological level and to make the mistake of releasing the psychological tension by changing the position before it was called for. In order to 'be' better we need to be at ease with keeping the tension. The following examples should illustrate when and why this matters (*see diagram on following page*):

I had managed to outplay my opponent in the opening of this game and have a promising position here. All of my pieces are mobilized and active. I decided it was time to do something and noticed the idea of taking on f2, playing ...d4, and putting my knight on e3. This is



Kolbus – Rowson
Rilton Cup, Stockholm 2001/2

highly tempting, but it comes to nothing because the position is not yet ripe for such action.

21...♗xf2+ 22 ♔xf2 d4

This looks strong, but it turns out that the e3-square by itself is not enough to cause White serious inconvenience.

23 ♖xc8 ♖xc8 24 ♖c1 ♖d8

24...♖xc1 25 ♕xc1 ♗b7 26 ♗xb7 ♕xb7 27 ♘d2 ♘e3 28 ♘f3 doesn't get Black anywhere.

25 ♗f3 ♕e7 26 ♕b2 ♖c8 27 ♖xc8+ ♗xc8 28 ♕c1 ♕d7 ½-½

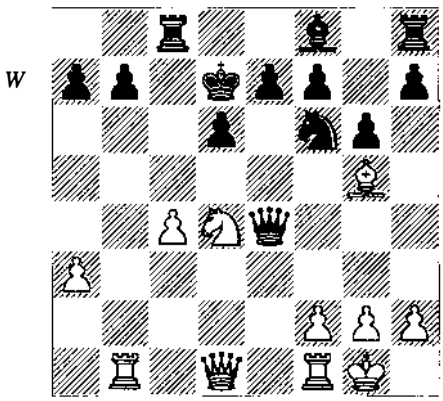
I remember feeling quite relieved when my opponent accepted my draw offer because after 29 ♕c6! I have to be careful not to lose the d4-pawn for insufficient compensation in some variations. However, Black can hold the balance in a number of ways; e.g., 29...f6 30 ♘a3 fxe5 31 fxe5 ♘e3 32 ♘b5 ♘g4+.

I felt a bit confused by the way my promising position came to nothing, because it seemed that taking on f2 and playing ...d4 was the right approach. However, when I showed the game to Luke McShane that evening he suggested keeping the tension with 21...♕e7! and it was immediately clear to me that this was better than what I did. In the diagram position, it only looks like I am fully ready for action, but in fact my queen is much better placed on e7 than d7. Now 22 ♗xc5 (after 22 ♗h3 ♗xf2+ 23 ♔xf2 ♖xc1 24 ♖xc1 d4 Black keeps full control) 22...bxc5 23 ♘c3 d4 24 ♘e4 ♗b7 is significantly better for Black. Such small improvements are often the difference between applying enduring pressure and applying immediate pressure, only to see it dissolve within a few moves.

In terms of the importance of keeping the tension, the following game was even more instructive for me, perhaps because of the unusual circumstances – a friendly game against much weaker players, played under the influence of just a little alcohol on a warm summer evening!

Jonathan Rowson – Tim Steer and Sandeep Sreekumar
The Angel and Greyhound Pub, Oxford 2004

1 d4 ♘c6 2 d5 ♘b4 3 a3 ♘a6 4 e4 c6 5 ♘f3 ♕a5+ 6 ♘c3 cxd5 7 exd5 d6 8 ♗b5+ ♗d7 9 ♗xd7+ ♔xd7 10 0-0
♘xb4 13 ♖b1 ♘bxd5 14 ♘xd5 ♕xd5 15 c4 ♕e4 16 ♗g5 ♖c8 *(D)*



Until this point, the game has developed as one might have expected it to. Both sides have played a bit casually, but the player with the 1000+ rating point advantage seems to be winning. I have chosen to show the game here because I felt very pleased with the way it ended. It may not look like a challenging position on the face of it, but I can tell you that I was itching to take that knight on f6. My chess instincts are very positional and the opportunity to mangle Black's structure was hard to resist. I also thought to myself: even if I can wait, what is that bishop going to do other than take

the knight? Indeed, it seems that I put it on g5 for that very reason. A couple of years ago, in the context of a casual game, I would have taken without a second thought, but recent experience has taught me that there is often value in keeping the tension, even when the nature of that value is not immediately apparent. I sensed that I might lose out if I casually played this move, so this was the one moment of the game where I paused, and looked for a more forcing solution:

17 ♖e1!

17 ♗xf6 exf6 is also winning for White, but by taking on f6, I put the f8-bishop in touch with the d6-pawn and the immediate opportunity to end the game is lost.

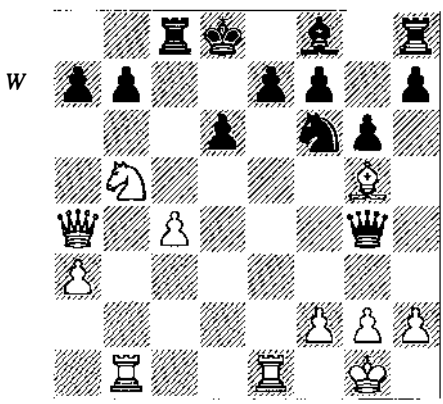
17...♕g4 18 ♕a4+ ♔c7

Or 18...♔d8 19 ♗xf6 exf6 20 ♖xb7 with mate to follow shortly.

19 ♘b5+

19 ♗xf6 was again my first thought, but then I noticed a nice detail that is only possible because I have retained the tension.

19...♔d8 *(D)*



20 ♘xd6!

I was delighted to see this move. It's not that I really needed it, and you might be thinking: "What's the fuss about? White is winning in so many different ways." Nonetheless, it was hugely instructive for me because it is only possible due to the fact that I didn't relieve the tension by taking on f6. This insight, combined with my pint of *Old Peculier*, made me very happy indeed.

20...♖b8

20...♕xg5 21 ♘xf7+ is well-hidden on move 17!

21 ♗xf6!

At last! But now it's definitely the best move.

21...exf6 22 ♕e8+! ♔c7 23 ♕xb8+! ♔xb8 24 ♖xb7+ ♔a8 25 ♖e8+ 1-0

A sweet finish.

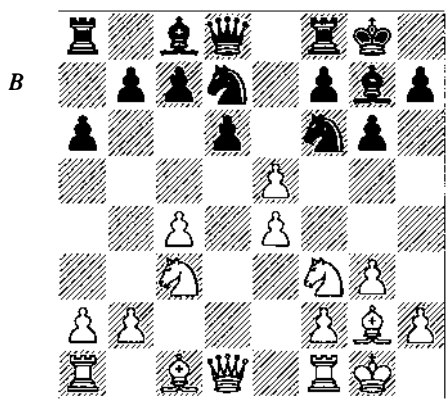
This game reminded me of the advice of the young Nigel Short: nothing is better for your chess than continued practice, regardless of the strength of the opposition.

Brilliance without Dazzle

There are a lot of subtleties in the following game, but I believe they all stem from Nikolić's appreciation of 'Being'. It seems a good place to end this chapter and an excellent illustration of the power of 'Being'. Nikolić did a few things in this game, but most of the moves were just about keeping the position in a constant state, seemingly in the knowledge that an opportunity to do something would occur in its own good time.

P. Nikolić – Gallagher
Bundesliga 2000/1

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘f3 ♗g7 4 g3 0-0 5 ♗g2 d6 6 0-0 ♘bd7 7 ♘c3 e5 8 e4 a6 9 dxe5 *(D)*

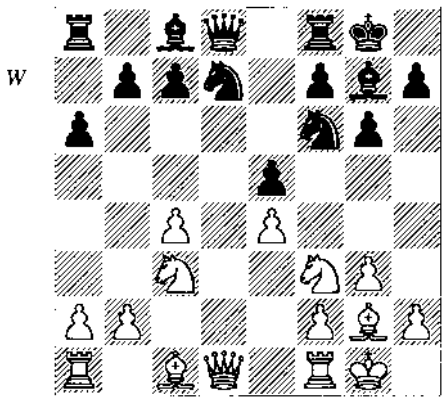


A very simple approach. This kind of simplification often favours Black, because White is

left with weak squares on d4 and d3 and it is somewhat easier for Black to manoeuvre when there is no central tension. On the other hand, ...a6 is made to look a little redundant and White can try to make use of his slight space advantage and extra tempo in relative peace. At the World Under-14 in Poland in 1990, I was astonished when my opponent, Robert Kempinski, now a strong GM, and then one of the top seeds at the tournament, made this capture. In that case I had played ...c6 rather than ...a6 and I remember thinking that my position was close to strategically winning – the image of complete dark-square domination, with knight on d4, bishop on c5 and rook coming, slyly, from a6 to b6. I am not sure why I felt this way, but I think it had something to do with a book I read proclaiming the virtues of the King's Indian, combined with youthful optimism.

9...dxe5 *(D)*

9...♘xe5 is probably better.



10 ♕c2

Many players have difficulties knowing in what order to develop their pieces and many might prefer a move like 10 ♗g5 here or perhaps 10 b3. Nikolić's move has the virtue of being more flexible. It is clear that a rook will want to come to d1 at some stage, but it is not yet clear where the c1-bishop wants to go. Moreover, the queen is perhaps slightly better on c2 than e2 because there is a fair chance that Black will play ...c6 and ...b5, when the c-file might be relevant. Moreover, it might be useful for White to have the e2-square for the knight to give extra protection to d4. Also, 10 h3 ♘c5!? is a possibility that is worth avoiding.

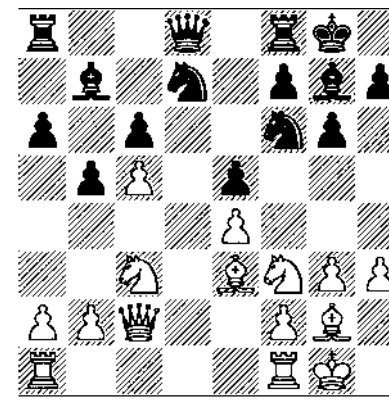
10...c6 11 h3

Preparing to put the bishop on e3 without ...♘g4 being a problem.

11...b5 12 ♗e3 ♗b7?!

Possibly a mistake, though I say that with the benefit of hindsight. 12...b4 13 ♘a4 ♕e7 14 c5 a5 15 ♘b6 leaves Black with considerable problems. However, 12...♕e7! looks like the most accurate move, and prevents the structure that arose in the game; then 13 c5? fails due to 13...♘xc5 14 ♘d5 cxd5 15 ♗xc5 ♕c7.

13 c5! *(D)*



This already sets the scene for the rest of the game. I watched the post-mortem and was struck by Nikolić's remark along the lines of: "I was very surprised that you let me get this structure (c5 vs c6) without any resistance." Nikolić already felt that White has a significant advantage.

13...♕c7

13...♕e7 again looks better.

14 ♖fd1 ♖fd8

Now, White would like to consolidate his gain of territory by playing b4 but it is instructive that Nikolić does this in a circuitous way:

15 a4!

15 b4 looks natural, but after 15...a5 16 a3 although White has the desired structure on the b- and c-files, Black controls the 'levers' of the a-file, i.e. he can determine whether and when to open the a-file. This is a significant difference from the game. Such small details often make

the difference between capitalizing on a small advantage and losing control of the game.

15...♘f8

After 15...b4?! 16 ♘e2 a5 17 ♘c1 White will put the knight on b3, where it will protect c5 and attack a5. This would be rather unpleasant for Black, since it will be difficult to avoid exchanges down the d-file in the long term, so a5 will remain a serious weakness. Moreover, White can probably make good use of the c4-square in an attempt to invade b6 or d6.

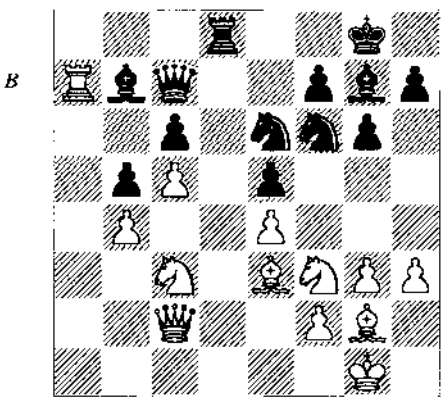
16 b4! ♘e6

So, both sides have completed their development, and Nikolić has some extra space. However, I imagine that for many players, even grandmasters weaker than Nikolić, it would be difficult to keep control of the position and the positional advantage would not amount to much. Even so, Nikolić plays the rest of the game precisely, and it is hard to trace a significant error from Black from this point onwards.

17 ♖xd8+

We are generally advised not to exchange pieces when we have extra space, but this rule, like all rules, needs to be qualified. In this case, Black's rooks have easy access to the d-file and are therefore not inferior to White's. Exchanging rooks therefore makes sense. What matters is sensing the coordination of the respective positions and judging how certain exchanges will change that.

17...♖xd8 18 axb5 axb5 19 ♖a7 *(D)*



This might look a bit vague, but from here until the end of the game, all of Nikolić's moves are similar. He simply tries to put his pieces on slightly better squares whenever possible and seems content to do that almost indefinitely. In this case, he has decided that the rooks will be exchanged, and so prefers to do it on the a-file, thus placing the black bishop even further out of the game, rather than on the d-file, where White would be the one to be inconvenienced.

19...♖a8

I imagine that after 19...♕b8, Nikolić intended 20 ♕a2, when 20...♘d4? can be met by 21 ♘xe5 ♕xe5 22 ♖xb7, when it seems Black can't make his temporary activity count.

20 ♖xa8+ ♗xa8 21 ♕a2

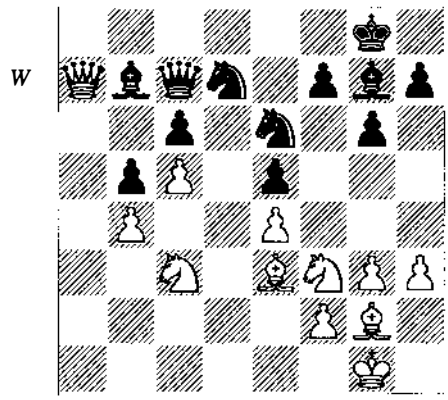
Again a simple move, taking the a-file for the queen.

21...♗b7 22 ♕a7

And again, a slightly more influential square.

What does it do there? Not much, but slightly more than it did on a2.

22...♘d7 *(D)*



I have shown this game to a few of my students and this is the stage of the game where they tend to flounder somewhat. They start trying things like ♗f1 with vague ideas of sacrificing on b5, or h4 with the spurious idea of attacking on the kingside and the commendable idea of activating the bishop with ♗h3. However, the only game in town here is Black's intention to play ...♘d4, and I imagine Nikolić played his next move within a minute.

23 ♘e2!

Simply preventing Black's main idea. I can imagine a few readers thinking: "I thought of

that, but it seemed a bit passive." As I've already said, this fear of passivity is a real problem, but I believe it derives from 'fear of being', i.e. fear of not doing something.

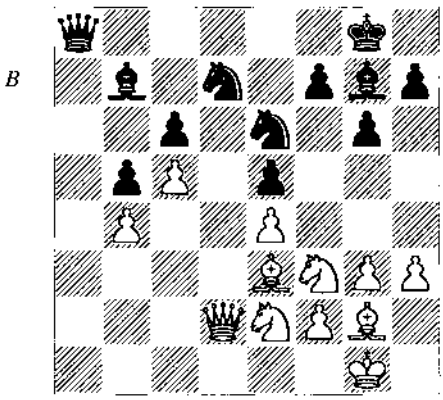
23...♕b8

Should White exchange the queens?

24 ♕a2!

No! It is much harder for Black to find space for five units than for four, and the white queen has considerable scope – not just the a-file but also the possibility of moving to d6 at some moment. However, just because White shouldn't exchange in the given position, he shouldn't reject the idea of exchanging in general.

24...♕a8 25 ♕d2! *(D)*



But doesn't that lose the a-file? Yes, but it wins the d-file and the d-file is of more use to White than the a-file is to Black. To explain exactly why is tricky – that's where fine judgement and experience come in – but it has something to do with the fact that d6, d7 and d8 are all major entry squares for the white queen, where it will be supported by the rest of the white army, while Black's queen will be a bit of a lone ranger on any of the squares from a4-a1 and will probably be sorely missed in Black's camp.

25...♘f6

This is another critical moment and a good example of the value of 'talking with your pieces'. Think of which black minor piece is most effective and which of White's is underperforming.

26 ♘g5!

Another excellent move. Black's bishops remain bad, but the e6-knight is an excellent piece and is well worth exchanging.

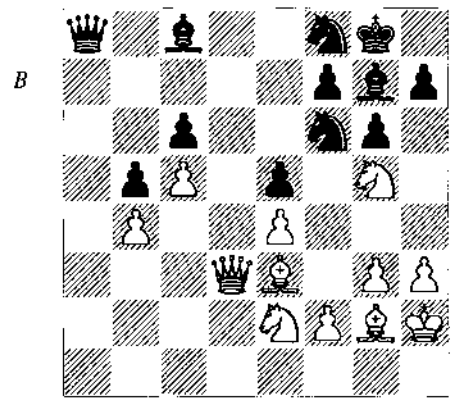
26...♘f8

An interesting decision – the knight on g5 looks a little odd and Joe threatens ...h6 followed by taking on e4.

27 ♕d3!

Keeping control in the most efficient way and preparing another deft manoeuvre. 27 ♘c3?! is not nearly as good – partly because the knight is on a bad circuit but also because Black can start hassling White with 27...♕a3.

27...♗c8 28 ♔h2! *(D)*



Using all the pieces – now there is no check on a1 to have to think about and White can already start thinking about playing f4.

28...♗d7 29 ♘f3!

Admirable patience. The knight does more on f3 than it did on g5 and this improves White's coordination and probes Black with an attack on e5.

29...♘e8

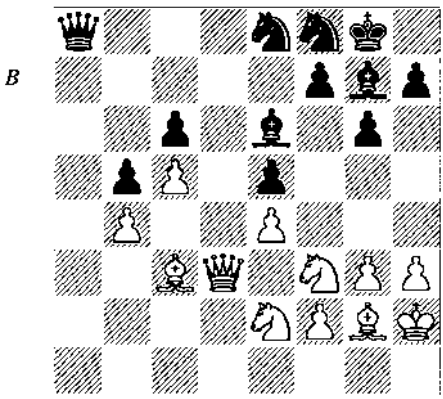
A reasonable move – Black might need to play ...f6 and the knight does cover d6. However, it is now clear that all of Black's minor pieces are a little short of breath. Now it is time to improve White's position further. White's b4-pawn is a little tender, as is Black's e5-pawn, and the following manoeuvre takes care of both.

30 ♗d2!?

A good concept, but due to certain concrete issues, I am not sure this was the best move. 30

♗c1!? ♗e6 31 ♘d2 ♕a4 is too much hassle for White to contemplate, but 30 ♕c3!? might be better. Then after 30...♕a2 (30...f6 31 ♘d2 ♗e6 32 ♕b2 ♕a2 33 ♕xa2 ♗xa2 34 ♘c1 ♗e6 35 f4 leaves White with a comfortable edge) 31 ♘c1 ♕e6 32 ♘d3 f6 33 ♘d2 White has a comfortable advantage. Note that in this case there is no easy way to complete the manoeuvre ♗d2-c3. That might cause some consternation, but it shouldn't. White's advantage is enduring and the position can be played in many different ways. If you can't organize your pieces optimally, organize them as well as possible and work on improving them – but remember the aim is just to keep polishing away, not to land decisive hammer-blows.

30...♗e6 31 ♗c3 *(D)*



31...f6?

Black misses his chance to generate a little activity. 31...♗c4! looks like pseudo-activity because at first glance White can just move the queen and then play ♘d2, but it is not so simple:

a) 32 ♕d1 ♕a3! 33 ♗xe5 ♗xe2 34 ♕xe2 ♕xb4 and White runs the risk of being worse.

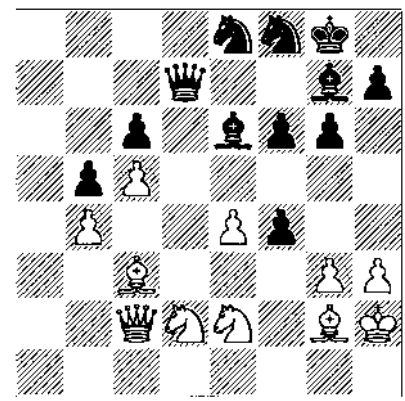
b) 32 ♕e3 ♕a3 33 ♗f1. I imagine Joe stopped here, possibly in time-trouble, but now Black can play 33...♗h6! 34 ♕xh6 ♗xe2, when he is actually better. This is one of the difficulties with having extra space: if you lose control it is very hard to protect all your assets.

c) 32 ♕d2 is probably best. 32...f6 is then forced, which is encouraging, but now it is hard to get organized enough to play ♘d2 and evict the new tenant of c4. 33 ♗f1 intending ♔g2 and ♘c1 seems to retain some advantage, because I don't think Black can cause White more than a certain degree of inconvenience. However, this is still a much better approach for Black than the one Joe took in the game. After 33...♘e6 34 ♔g2 ♕d8 35 ♕xd8 ♘xd8 36 ♘c1 ♗f7 37 ♗d3 White is still better, but much less than he was in the game.

32 ♘d2

Now all the important squares are covered and White is ready for f4.

32...♕c8 33 f4 ♕d7 34 ♕c2! exf4 *(D)*



35 ♘xf4!

This far from obvious move shows excellent judgement. 35 ♘xf4 has several advantages over 35 gxf4. First of all it retains more pawn-shield for White's king. Secondly, it doesn't give Black any pawn targets because White can play for the e5 break without leaving any weaknesses behind. What makes this move impressive is that Nikolić is not concerned about the theoretical weakness of the e-pawn or the e5-square, because he correctly judges that neither is relevant in the given position. 35 gxf4 ♕c7 is considerably more tense, and the draughtiness of White's king needlessly introduces a third result into the equation.

35...♗f7 36 ♘f3 g5

A significant concession, but it's hard just to sit there and wait for moves like ♕b2 and e5.

37 ♘e2 ♘g6 38 ♘ed4 ♘e7 39 ♕b2!

I believe this kind of move is very hard for some players. White wants to play e5, but has

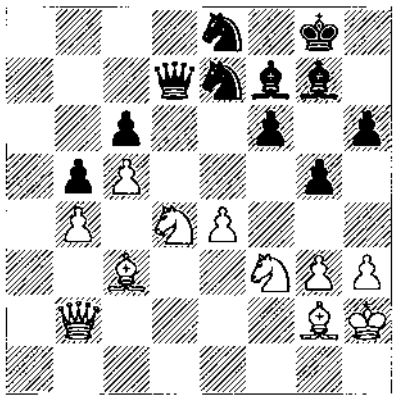
been temporarily prevented from doing so. The first instinct of most players would be to find a way to make e5 happen – i.e. 'to do something'. However, White is clearly better here from a static point of view and it suffices to play moves that keep the position more or less as it is, with little micro-plans along the way. Sooner or later something will show up 'organically'. Strong players know this through experience. When your position is good in terms of quality it is enough to play constructive moves. The tactics will show up when they are good and ready – but if you try to force them you are likely to make things harder for yourself.

After 39 ♘b3 g4 40 ♘fd4 f5 White has allowed a needless mess to arise.

Desperate attempts to force e5 such as 39 ♕e2?! damage White's position. 39...♘c7 40 e5 ♘ed5 is another unnecessary mess.

39...h6 *(D)*

W



40 ♕a1!

Again! Nikolić simply improves the scope of his queen. He has no particular intentions on the a-file but simply judges that the queen is better on a1 than on b2.

40...♔h7 41 ♘d2!

With the idea of bringing the knight to e3. There it will keep an eye on c4 and f5, won't get in the way of the g2-bishop and will also control d5 – which might be useful, depending on the timing of e5.

41...♘c7 42 ♘f1

42 ♕a7 is suddenly possible, but it is rarely a good idea to interrupt a perfectly sensible manoeuvre before it is complete. In this case, 42...f5 43 exf5 ♘ed5 is probably not good for Black, but is better for White to avoid in any case, if only for psychological reasons.

42...f5

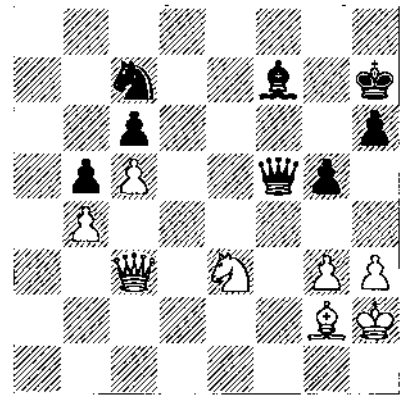
Very few players can stand to await their fate. The opening of the a1-h8 and h1-a8 diagonals was offered by Black, so White never actually had to make the effort to force through e5. **Note that this is quite a common outcome of 'Being' – your opponent does your 'Doing' for you!**

43 ♘xf5!

43 exf5 ♘cd5 is probably worth avoiding.

43...♘xf5 44 exf5 ♗xc3 45 ♕xc3 ♕xf5 46 ♘e3 *(D)*

B

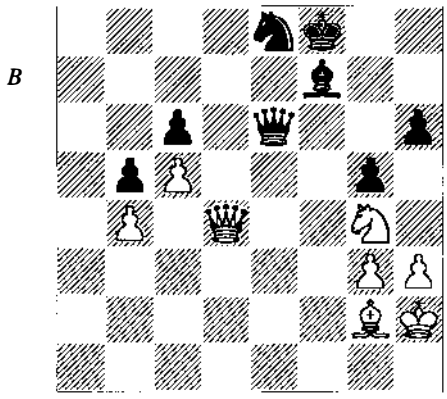


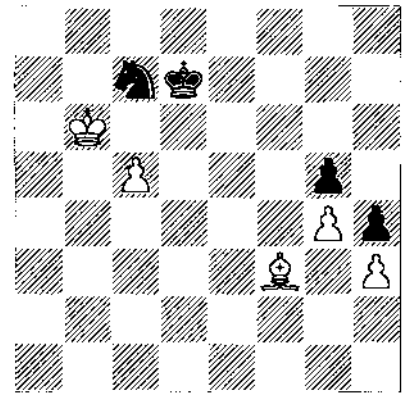
Black has freed his position considerably, but at the cost of giving White access to all his weaknesses. Note the c6-pawn in particular. Back on move 13 it was hard to foresee that it would be such a significant positional factor, but in the given instance it is enough to give White a decisive advantage. For instance, if the b-pawn were on b7, White's advantage would be containable, but in the given position Black cannot deal with the threats to his king and the threats to his c6-pawn.

46...♕e6 47 ♕d3+ ♔g8 48 ♕d8+ ♘e8 49 ♘g4!

Again it is important not to be too single-minded about the c6-pawn. 49 ♘c2 ♕c4 obliges White to play 50 ♕d2, which retains the decisive advantage, but still doesn't feel right.

49...♔f8 50 ♕d4! *(D)*





Another Nikolić move. He centralizes the queen, and, almost incidentally, threatens to come to h8.

50...♘g7 51 ♘e5 ♘f5 52 ♕e4 ♗e8 53 ♘xc6

Forty moves after becoming a weakness, the pawn drops. But note how patient Nikolić was. White wins a pawn without allowing any counterplay at all.

53...♕xe4 54 ♗xe4 ♗xc6 55 ♗xc6 ♘d4 56 ♗e4 ♔e7 57 ♔g2 ♔e6 58 ♔f2 ♔e5 59 ♔e3 ♘e6

The final phase of the game is also impressive.

60 ♔d3 ♘c7 61 ♗c6 ♘a6 62 ♗xb5

62 ♔c3 might look better, but after 62...♘c7 White has to revert back to the game continuation.

62...♘xb4+ 63 ♔c4 ♘d5 64 ♗e8 ♘c7 65 ♗h5 ♔e4 66 ♗d1! ♔e5 67 ♗f3! ♔e6 68 ♔b4 ♔d7 69 ♔a5 h5 70 ♔b6 h4 71 g4! *(D)*

Now this move seems obvious to me, but I remember at the time it surprised me because superficially it restricts the white bishop. However, the much more important point is that the g5-pawn is a serious weakness while the h3-pawn is not. Moreover, White now has no fear of any tricks based on being left with the wrong-coloured rook's pawn.

71...♘e6 72 ♗e4! ♘c7 73 ♗f5+ ♔d8 74 ♔c6!

Moving in front of passed pawns is often counter-intuitive, but in this case it is clearly the best way to break Black's dark-square blockade.

74...♘e8 75 ♗g6 ♘c7 76 ♗f7 ♘a6 77 ♔d6 ♘c7 78 ♗c4 1-0

A quiet but brilliant, brilliantly quiet game by Nikolić.

Conclusion: How to *Be* Better

1) It's not all about you! Sometimes you just have to play decent moves and your opponent will do your work for you.

2) When you have a good position, 'keeping it between the hedges' is often enough to win.

3) The threat *is* often stronger than its execution.

4) Don't release the tension prematurely.

9 Why Shouldn't I Be Defensive?

Yossarian: They're trying to kill me.
Clevinger: No one's trying to kill you.
Yossarian: Then why are they shooting at me?
Clevinger: They're shooting at everyone. They're trying to kill everyone.
Yossarian: And what difference does that make?
JOSEPH HELLER, *Catch 22*

Joseph Heller captures something important about what it feels like to be under attack. When you find yourself defending a difficult position, you don't usually think 'this position is rather difficult' but something more personal: '*I* have a difficult position' or '*I* don't like my position." It is not just that the king is under attack, but that *my* king is under attack. It is not merely Black is worse here, but rather, *I* am worse here.

I have been annotating chess games for over a decade and have used a variety of ways to designate agency, i.e. to say *who* is thinking or feeling a certain way. For example, "*Jon* is slightly better here", "*Black* may regret not taking on e5", "*I* still have good counterplay." I think that like most annotators, I use such terms more or less interchangeably and don't worry too much about consistency in such matters.

Most of the time, this probably doesn't matter much, but I think agency becomes quite significant when we are defending. When we fear we may lose a position, we feel not only that the position is under threat, but that our very selves are under threat.

What does it mean for your self to be under attack? It means that your ego is on high alert and that it will do everything it can to defend you. Indeed, your ego, when under attack, has significant weaponry at its disposal, and, suitably, these are known as defences. One might think of defences as the ego's immune system. The following quotation, taken from George Valliant (Harvard psychiatrist) in his brilliant book, *The Wisdom of the Ego*, places this claim in context: "There are three very different means by which our minds can cope with stress and danger. First, we can receive help from others ..., second, we can employ voluntary, learned methods to help ourselves ... Such manoeuvres are called conscious coping strategies. Third, we can deploy involuntary, unconscious strategies. These are often subsumed under the psychoanalytic term *ego mechanisms of defence*. But ... the use of defensive mechanisms alters perception of both internal and external reality in a largely involuntary way. Often the result of such mental distortion of reality is to diminish anxiety and depression, and thus to reduce the physiological and psychic wear and tear of stress."

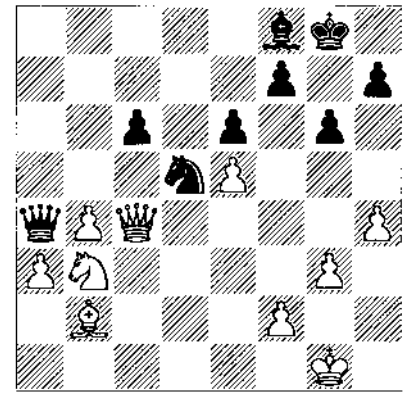
According to Valliant, defences rearrange the sources of internal conflict so that we can manage them better. However, in order to do this, something has to be distorted, and this is why I feel that Valliant's idea may be applicable to chess. To distort a source of psychological conflict may be a highly adaptive thing to do in our lives as a whole, but in a chess game I suspect that many distortions do more harm than good and this may partly account for why many players find it difficult to defend. Adapted to a chess context, the relevant distortion would be applied to at least one of the following: the subject ('I'), the object (the position) the idea (the variation, the plan) and the feeling (the evaluation).

When such a distortion happens, it happens unconsciously. That's not to say that a player won't be able to recognize what they are doing if it is pointed out to them (e.g. massively over-estimating a threat) but that they won't be able to recognize what they are doing *as* a psychological defence (e.g. massively over-estimating a threat because looking at the consequences of the threat carefully is too uncomfortable).

Valliant has an extensive taxonomy of defences ranging from psychotic defences that are really dangerous (delusional projection) to mature defences that are benign (like humour or excessive altruism). In all cases, he argues that the defences are a way of trying to stay healthy.

I have neither the professional expertise nor the inclination to make definitive judgements about such defences, and this makes me wary of giving illustrations of defences from other players. Moreover, if we take Valliant seriously, I can't really illustrate this point from my own games, because I cannot recognize a defence of my own *as* a defence! The purpose of this brief excursion into psycho-dynamic theory is to highlight that **in order to become better defenders we need to be aware of this tendency to confuse defending our position with defending our selves**. Only if we remain a little detached can we really enjoy defence, and I think success in chess, especially with the black pieces, often comes about through the enjoyment of defence. In this respect it's important to realize that just because you are defending, it doesn't mean your position is worse.

Moreover, the stressful nature of defending, and the fact that it often feels so personal, makes some sense of why defending has such an image problem. My impression is that defence is invariably seen as an unattractive necessity that you have to resort to when your attack doesn't work. However, it is possible to be defending in an advantageous position, and it is also possible to defend creatively, ingeniously, resourcefully or even heroically. I hope the following examples help to illustrate that (*see next diagram*):



Gdanski – Arkell
European Clubs Cup, Neum 2000

The situation looks pretty grim for Black. He is a pawn down and White seems to have good control of the position. Given two moves – say ♔g2 and ♘d4 – Black's position will become hopeless. However, at this very moment Black has a surprising resource and it begins with one of the most extraordinary moves I have ever seen.

33...g5!!

I feel I should give the reader a few quiet moments to make sense of this move before adding any thoughts of my own. 33...g5!! illustrates, I think, the core reason why Kotov's canonical method of calculation, in which we start our thinking by looking for candidate moves, is flawed. 33...g5!! could never be an original candidate move because it only begins to make sense after looking at the position and finding that the more conventional approaches are not working, and then gaining some insight into why they are not working. Indeed, although ingenious and highly impressive, the move is actually quite logical once you start trying to solve Black's problems. You only have to examine the more obvious (though still quite creative) attempt to free Black's position 33...c5!? 34 ♘xc5 ♗xc5 35 ♕xc5 ♕d1+. Now you find that there is a check and you might also see the idea of meeting 36 ♔g2 with 36...♘f4+ followed by ...♕g4+ if White takes. Then your heart sinks when you see that there is no perpetual due to 36 ♔h2. But then, while some would give up on the whole idea of ...c5, Keith thought to himself: if only there were a way of checking the king on h2, and he managed to reject *the move* 33...c5 but hold on to *the idea.* Black needs a check on the h-file for the check on d1 to become a perpetual, and therefore has to get rid of the pawn on h4. Hence 33...g5!!.

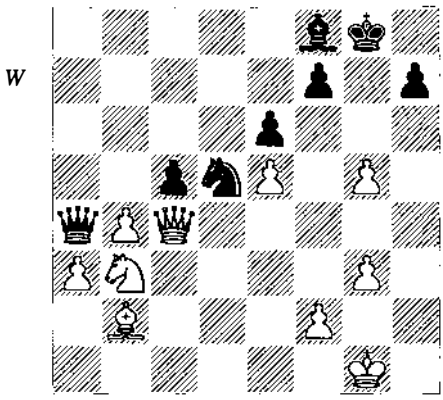
It's hard to say what it takes to come up with a move like this. Even after this explanation, you might still be left with the feeling that you could never find the hidden idea. In this sense 33...g5!! is a good example of the relevance of

the hindsight/foresight distinction introduced in Chapter 1. Keith's idea of playing for perpetual check directly from the original position is a remarkable feat of conjuring, and something that would not occur to the vast majority of players during practical play. Yet such moves often spring from situations such as these where your determination to defend as tenaciously as possible gives you the glimmer of an idea, and then you just need to tweak it slightly, and get a little cooperation from the opponent to make it work.

34 hxg5

Apparently just after Keith played 33...g5, Gdanski, who was rated 2557 when the game was played, looked bemused and just whipped the pawn off. Taking is the best move, but he should have treated 33...g5 with a little more respect.

34...c5! *(D)*



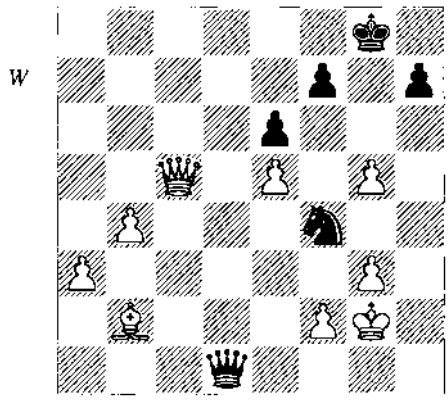
Now liquidation is a serious threat because most of the 4 vs 3 positions will give Black excellent drawing chances. Even if they don't look too pleasant for Black, they are much more pleasant than the position before 33...g5, so White has more reason than Black to be upset.

35 ♘xc5?

This was not the game continuation but I wanted to make the main idea prominent. White didn't fall into the trap quite so directly. He now saw Black's devious idea and deviated from this main line, but Black drew without problems in any case: 35 ♔g2 cxb4 36 axb4 ♕a2! 37 ♗c1 ♗xb4 38 ♕c8+ ♔g7 39 ♘d4 ♗c3 40 ♘xe6+ (after 40 ♘f3, 40...♕a1! is the only move to keep the balance; 40...♕e2? 41 g6! and 40...♗b4? 41 g6! are both favourable for White) 40...fxe6 41 ♕d7+ ♔h8 42 ♕e8+ ½-½.

35 ♗c3!? is probably best, exchanging the relatively ineffectual bishop. Then White's winning chances and Black's drawing chances seem about equal.

35...♗xc5 36 ♕xc5 ♕d1+ 37 ♔g2 ♘f4+! *(D)*



The hidden detail: Black forces a draw. Curiously, when I showed the original position to a student, Gordon Rattray, he saw 33...g5 after a little prompting but rejected it, because in the process of visualizing the resulting variations he made a persistent miscalculation. He saw this far, but couldn't see how to deal with the fact that after ...♕g4-h5+, the white king will have the g3-square. In fact, White will not have the g3-square, because Black's queen is not limited to light squares and can also give check on h4.

This is another good example of what happens when we confuse ideas with variations (compare with 'Moves and Ideas' in Chapter 6). If you frame the *idea* of perpetual check in terms of ...♕d1-g4-h5+ you might run into problems because your perceptual system might filter out moves like ...♕g4-h4+ as a 'separate idea', not associated with the perpetual. This is partly a problem with the linear thinking. If we are not careful, one idea follows another and our thoughts will be determined in advance, locked

in motion by the way we began our thinking process.

38 ♔h2 ♕h5+ 39 ♔g1 ♕d1+ 40 ♔h2 ♕h5+

Black draws by perpetual check.

A truly brilliant defensive conception from Arkell.

Losing a Pawn to Gain a Position

One of the benefits of looking at chess from the perspective of four dimensions is that it frees up your imagination, and makes defending more fun. In my experience, one of the most practical ways to draw or even win from a difficult position is to change the character of the position by sacrificing material. This can take various forms, but the most typical is to sacrifice a pawn to increase the activity of your pieces. This often means a transition in which you go from being behind in terms of Opportunity and Quality, to being behind on Material. This shift may not objectively improve your position, but it often drastically increases your practical chances, as the following examples illustrate.

Short – Rowson

British Ch, Torquay 1998

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 cxd4 5 ♘xd4 a6 6 ♗e2 e5 7 ♘b3 ♗e7 8 0-0 0-0 9 ♗e3 ♗e6 10 ♘d5 ♘bd7

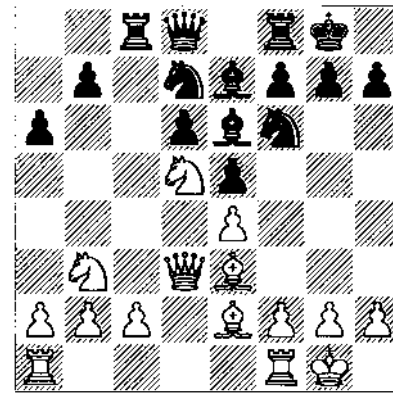
This is just about playable, but now I would prefer 10...♘xd5 11 exd5 ♗f5 12 ♕d2 a5!. This important move, directed against White's idea of ♘a5 followed by b4 and c4, gives Black a comfortable game.

11 ♕d3 ♖c8!? *(D)*

Not bad, but played with only a half-hearted intention of following up vigorously. 11...♗xd5 12 exd5 ♘c5 13 ♕d2 is currently the main line.

12 c4 ♘c5?!

12...b5 is playable but for some reason I didn't believe it at the time. 13 cxb5 axb5 14 a3 probably gives White an edge. 12...♘e8!? intending ...♗g5 looks contrived, but is probably better than the game continuation.



13 ♘xc5 dxc5 14 b3!

White is clearly better. This simple move shattered all my half-thoughts about playing ...♗xd5 followed by ...c4 and ...♗c5 and winning with a splendid display of dark-square domination.

14...♗xd5

There was no real choice for Black. One can only tolerate such a horse in one's territory for so long.

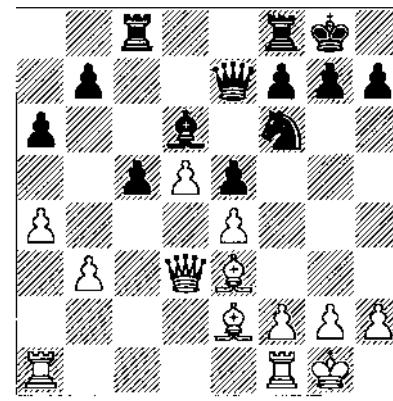
15 cxd5 ♗d6

Ideally I would like to put my knight on d6 and exchange dark-squared bishops, but this is not possible due to the weakness of c5, so I decided to connect rooks and over-protect c5.

16 a4!

Another oppressive move, preventing ...b5.

16...♕e7 *(D)*



For the uninitiated, this move looks fairly routine, but actually it introduces a positional

threat. Readers familiar with Petrosian's games will see the idea immediately, for the following type of positional sacrifice, in which material is relinquished in order to gain a firmer defensive foothold, was his trademark. However, those who are not so familiar with Petrosian's games may find it more difficult to see (and appreciate) the idea. Indeed, one Scottish chess journalist wrote in his column the following day that I 'blundered' a pawn and only salvaged a draw because my sleep-deprived opponent hadn't come to terms with dropping half a point to Matthew Sadler in the previous round.

17 g3?!

I was very surprised that Nigel allowed me to implement my idea, not least because it is really my *only* idea! 17 ♖fc1 covers c4 and gives White complete control of the position. After the game I said to Nigel: "I wonder what would have happened after 17 ♖fc1?" He replied with an honest but somewhat wicked smile: "I think you would have gone down, actually."

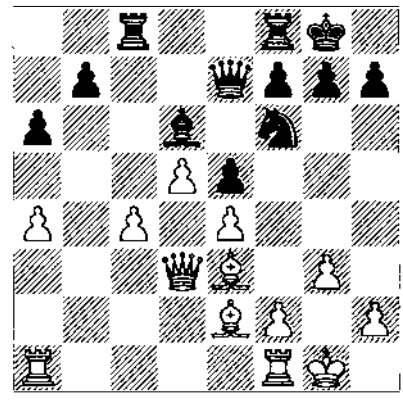
After 17 ♖fc1, Black has no constructive plan. My queenside activity has been neutralized, and any ...f5 break is liable to highlight the presence of White's light-squared bishop (and the absence of a counterpart). Black is still in the game, but c5 is very weak and the best I can hope for is to lose the pawn on c5 while exchanging dark-squared bishops and then get an ending of ♕+♘ vs ♕+♗ with some sort of dark-square blockade on d6. However, White doesn't have to walk into this and can combine attacking c5 with a suitably prepared f4 and perhaps bringing the bishop on e2 to h3.

17...c4! 18 bxc4 *(D)*

Short took the pawn with a dismissive air. He's a truly great chess-player, but a lousy actor, and I could tell that he regretted allowing this. It's not that this transformation radically changes the assessment of the position, for White is still much better, but Black is no longer a slave to White's intentions, and suddenly there is some 'air' in my position, which makes it a lot more fun to play.

18...♗c5!

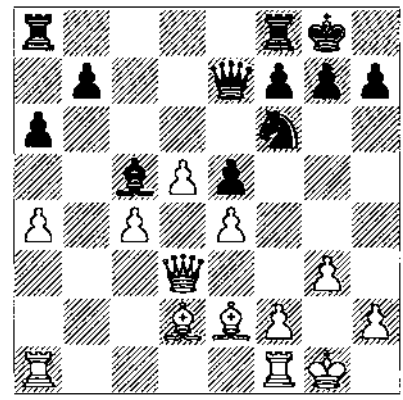
B



My impression was confirmed when he now thought for about half an hour. In return for the pawn I gain a firm foothold on the dark squares and secure posts for all my pieces. It was necessary to prepare this idea with ...♗d6 and ...♕e7 because otherwise White could make me lose coordination by attacking b7 and playing d6 when I'm not ready for it.

19 ♗d2 ♖a8!? *(D)*

W

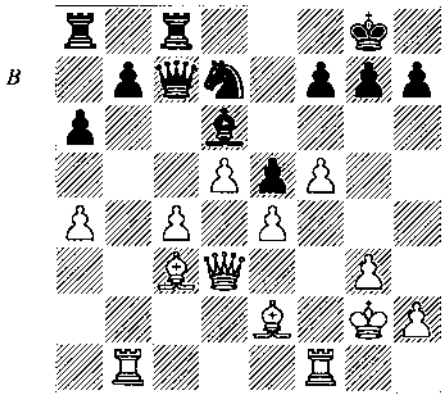


I remember thinking this was a great move, but now, even if effective, it looks more pretentious than anything else. My idea, I think, was to have the option of ...a5 available, or ...b6 in the event of White playing a5. However, it slowly dawned on me that it was useful to keep the queenside somewhat fluid to prevent White from having a completely free hand on the kingside.

20 ♔g2 ♖fc8 21 ♗c3 ♗d6 22 ♖ab1 ♕c7 23 f4

23 a5!?, intending something slower like ♖fc1, ♗d2 and ♗d1-a4, might have been a better bet.

23...♘d7 24 f5!? *(D)*



This decision surprised me a little. I don't think it was Nigel's original intention, but there is no comfortable way to keep the tension and at least his kingside space gives him a clear idea to play for in the run-up to the time-control. On the other hand, it gives me a clear idea to play against, and White's e2-bishop is not likely to bother me for a while.

24...b6 25 ♗d2 ♖ab8 26 ♕f3 ♕d8 27 h4 ♘c5

Although I give most of Black's moves without comment, few of them were easy to decide upon because I have to strike a very delicate balance between defending and keeping the possibility of a counter-attack, if only to keep my opponent under some psychological pressure.

The idea of sacrificing an exchange as well as a pawn by 27...♖c5!? 28 ♗b4 f6 29 ♗xc5 ♘xc5 appealed to my sense of deviance. However, the problem with such an approach is that it makes it almost impossible for me to do or take anything without fatally compromising my position. Moreover, I cannot force White to take the bait.

28 ♖a1 ♗e7! 29 ♖h1 ♘b7 30 g4 ♘d6

The first whiff of counterplay.

31 ♖ac1 f6

A necessity – I can't allow g5 and f6 and a possible light-square and g-file invasion.

32 a5 ♘b7!

Maintaining control of the dark squares. I think it's worth stating the obvious sometimes: **knights standing on light squares control dark squares**. Often when you have a problem with a colour complex, the reason is that your knights are sitting on squares of that colour.

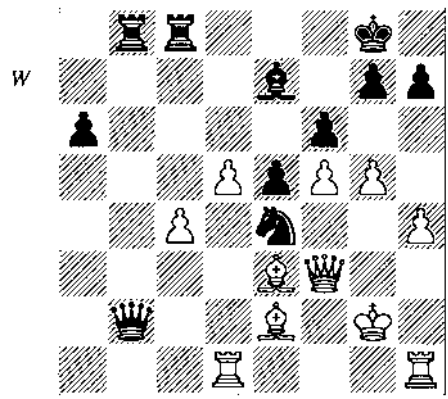
33 axb6 ♕xb6 34 g5 ♘c5 35 ♗e3 ♕b2!

I remember that we were both down to our last five minutes here. I could sense that I had made a lot of progress over the last 20 moves and began to wonder if I might even win this game.

36 ♖cd1?

36 gxf6! ♗xf6 (36...gxf6 is best, but it's not an easy move to play; the kings are embarrassed by the sight of each other) 37 ♗xc5 ♖xc5 38 ♖b1 ♕xb1 39 ♖xb1 ♖xb1 40 ♕a3 and Black's lack of coordination keeps the white queen happy.

36...♘xe4! *(D)*



Nigel assumed this wasn't possible, but my queen has three squares on the second rank, while he has only two rooks, so there will be no early eviction.

37 ♖b1 ♕a2 38 ♖a1

38 ♖xb8 ♖xb8 39 ♖e1 ♗b4! and Black is fine.

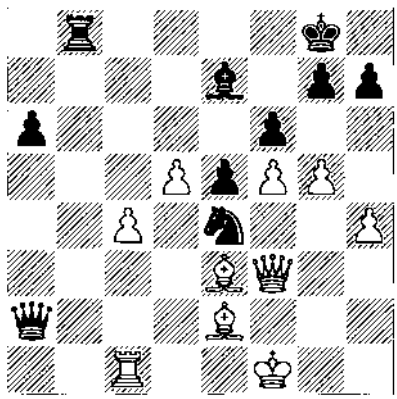
38...♕b2 39 ♖hb1 ♕c2 40 ♖c1 ♕b2

Reaching the time-control. Now after some thought Nigel played a line that looked winning, but actually he had a stronger continuation.

41 ♖ab1 ♕a2 42 ♖xb8 ♖xb8 43 ♔f1? *(D)*

This looks like a safe winning try, for if I move my knight, the sluice gates are opened. (What is a sluice gate anyway? My proposed definition: a gate that nobody has seen but should never be opened!) However, I was fortunate to have one last defensive resource. It turns out that White probably did have a win here, but more by chance than design.

43 c5! is strong, but very complicated and White has to play well to avoid various pitfalls on the road to victory. 43...♖b2 44 ♕xe4 ♖xe2+ and now 45 ♔f3 ♖h2! and 45 ♔g3 are fine for Black, but 45 ♔f1! causes problems: 45...♖xe3 46 ♕xe3 ♕xd5 47 c6 ♕h1+ 48 ♔f2 ♕h2+! 49 ♔f3 ♕h3+ 50 ♔e4 ♕g4+ 51 ♔d3! ♕xf5+ 52 ♔e2 ♔f8 53 gxf6 ♗xf6 54 c7 ♕c8 55 ♕a3+ ♔f7 56 ♕b3+ ♔e7 57 ♕b4+ ♔f7 58 ♖c6 and Black is not long for this world.



43...♗a3! 44 ♕xe4

44 ♖d1 ♘c3 45 ♗a7!?. Needless to say, Fritz 'found' this detail. Black seems to survive though: 45...♘xe2 46 ♗xb8 ♘d4 47 ♖xd4 (anything else gives Black lots of counterplay) 47...exd4 48 ♕d3 ♕a1+ 49 ♔g2 ♕b2+ 50 ♔f3 ♕xb8 51 ♕xa3 ♕b1 52 ♕xa6 ♕xf5+ 53 ♔g3 and Black probably has nothing better than forcing a draw.

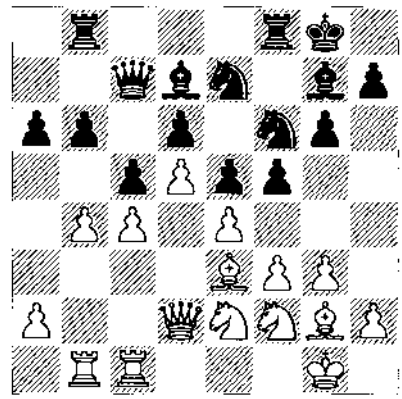
44...♗xc1 45 ♗xc1 ♕a1 46 ♕e3 ♖b1 47 ♔g2 ♖xc1 48 ♕b6 ♕a2

48...♖c2 is equivalent.

49 ♕d8+ ♔f7 50 ♕d7+ ♔f8 ½-½

After the scoresheets were signed, I felt oddly touched when Nigel looked at a mutual friend before pointing to me and ruefully stating: "Bloody Scottish Petrosian!"

In the following game, my opponent missed a chance to change the character of the position:



Rowson – Arakhamia-Grant
British Ch, Scarborough 2004

Black has a difficult position. She has capacity problems, i.e. too many pieces for too little space. Moreover, the g7-bishop and e7-knight are under-performing and the queenside has been weakened with ...a6, making it easier for White to infiltrate there. Keti needs to generate some counterplay, and unless she can find a constructive plan here, her position will go from bad to worse.

At this point it is not clear that I am threatening much, because a4 can usually be met with ...a5 and Black will be able to put a rook on b4 in some variations and possibly sacrifice the exchange in the process. However, I have a certain amount of time to build up on the queenside by attacking the a-pawn or threatening to infiltrate on the b-file, so Black needs to use this time wisely to develop her counterplay on the kingside.

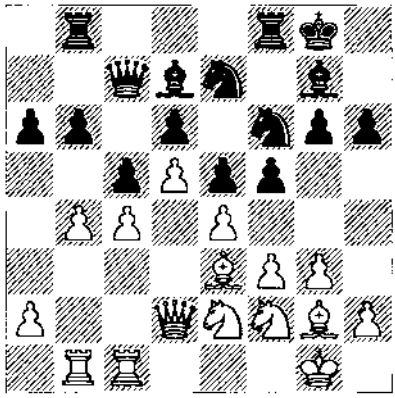
But what can be done? Obviously Black would like to play ...h6, ...g5 and possibly ...♘g6, when the counterplay assumes serious proportions. However, at the moment this would simply leave h6 *en prise*. Black could also consider playing 18...h5!?, but this does little to

improve the e7-knight or the g7-bishop and White can perhaps seal the kingside with 19 h4!?.

So what should Black play? There are a few possibilities, but at such moments it is important to think carefully about the position from your opponent's perspective. I was pleased to have full control of the game and was looking forward to opening the queenside, and glad not to be under attack in any way. In light of this, Black should look for ways to change the character of the position.

18...♔h8?!

This move is often useful in the King's Indian, for instance to have g8 for the e7-knight, but here it doesn't meet the demands of the position. I believe that Black's best practical chance here is the radical 18...h6! *(D)*.



Such moves have always appealed to me, but they are much easier to suggest than to play. The point of this move is of course to play ...g5 and if Black gets that 'for free' then her position will improve considerably. However, can't I just win a pawn on h6? Let's see: I can't take it immediately: 19 ♗xh6? ♗xh6 20 ♕xh6 cxb4! 21 ♖xb4 (21 exf5 ♕c5! also gives counterplay) 21...fxe4 22 fxe4 ♕c5! and the double threat of ...♕xb4 and ...♕xf2+ means that Black is actually winning! Therefore, I already have to compromise by taking on c5 first, and this significantly reduces my options on the queenside. Now let's see the resulting position: 19 bxc5 bxc5 20 ♗xh6 ♗xh6 21 ♕xh6 ♕a5!. In return for the pawn Black has made a favourable exchange of bishops, activated her queen, and forced White into a more defensive role. Don't get me wrong, I am not saying this solves Black's problems, but it does change them, and it gives me some to deal with too. 22 ♖xb8 ♖xb8 23 ♘c3 seems best and then Black should probably play 23...♖f8!? (23...♕a3 looks tempting, but it would be too easy for White to find 24 exf5! ♗xf5 25 ♘fe4!, regaining complete control), when White has lots of moves, but the position is rather complex and I think Black has some practical chances. I am not suggesting that Black is fully OK, not at all, but is the position actually worse than it was on move 18? I am not so sure, and I know that, at least from a psychological point of view, it would have been difficult for me to adjust to this transformation. Moreover, it is entirely possible that some players, after considering this line, would decide not to take on h6 and continue playing on the queenside. This would be an understandable mistake, and this highlights my point that **to defend difficult positions you have to play on your opponent's fears.**

In terms of whether Black should have played 18...h6!?, I think that depends on how bad you think the position was at that stage. However, I think this approach was probably better than playing with no plan at all. In the game, it turned out to be quite easy to break through.

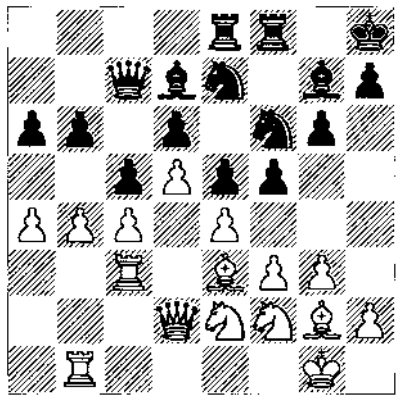
19 ♖c3!?

19 a4 a5! 20 bxa5 bxa5 21 ♘c3 ♖b4! (possession of b4 is the key to the position: if I can block the b-file I can divert Black from the b-file by attacking a5) 22 ♘d3 ♖xc4 23 ♕a2 ♖d4! and not only is Black probably at least OK, but Keti thrives in such messy positions. Again note that to make full use of Black's defensive resources, it is necessary to be willing to sacrifice material.

19...♖be8?! 20 a4 *(D)*

20...♗c8?

Black should play 20...♗xa4!. Then 21 b5?! axb5 22 cxb5 ♕d7 looked rather unclear to me but it seemed unlikely that Keti would go for such complications when short of time, especially because it commits her to sacrificing material. After 23 ♕b2 ♘exd5!? 24 exd5 ♘xd5 I suspect that Black is actually better. I was



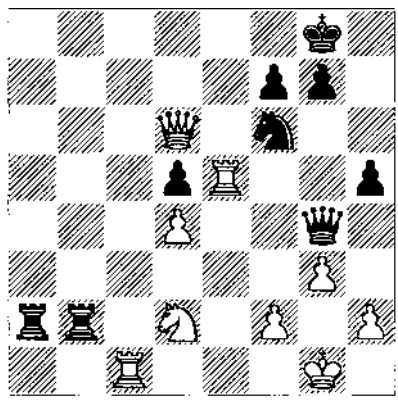
intending the simple 21 ♖a3 ♗d7 22 ♖xa6, when White has a comfortable edge.

21 a5 cxb4 22 ♖xb4! bxa5 23 ♖b2! ♘d7 24 ♘d3! fxe4 25 fxe4 ♘g8 26 c5

Achieving the strategic goal, and with it, a winning position.

26...♘xc5 27 ♘xc5 dxc5 28 ♗xc5 ♖f7 29 ♗e3 ♕d7 30 ♕c1! ♘f6?! 31 ♖bc2 ♖ff8 32 h3! ♕b5 33 ♖b2 ♕a4 34 ♖c4 ♕d7 35 ♖c7 ♕a4 36 ♘c3 ♕a3 37 ♗c5 1-0

The following is another example of 'losing a pawn to gain a position' but it also shows how much fun it can be to defend!



Speelman – Rowson
Bunratty 1997

Things look pretty grim for White here, but there is a way to counterattack by sacrificing a pawn.

32 h3!

Forcing the queen to declare its intentions. On g4 it controlled g5 and c8 and therefore kept the white rooks under control, but this move forces the queen to lose control of one of these important squares.

32...♕xd4

32...♕xh3 33 ♖g5! appears to give White enough to draw; e.g., 33...♘h7 34 ♖xh5! ♕xh5 35 ♖c8+ ♘f8 36 ♕xf8+ ♔h7 37 ♕h8+ ♔g6 38 ♖c6+ f6 39 ♕e8+ ♔h6 40 ♕h8+ with a perpetual.

33 ♕f8+!!

I should really have seen that one coming, but it came as a complete shock. In the space of thirty seconds I went from thinking I was completely winning to thinking that I was completely lost. As is often the case, the truth lies somewhere in between.

33...♔h7 34 ♖g5

The counter-attack is enough to force another queen sacrifice:

34...♕xf2+! 35 ♔h1 ♕h2+! ½-½

I insist! It was pleasant to offer a draw with such a cheeky move, especially against such a great player!

The Spirit of Resistance

Suddenly, in the darkest depths of winter, I found that there was within me an invincible summer.
CAMUS

The following game features a truly extraordinary comeback and is perhaps the most impressive defensive effort I have ever seen. I have tried to annotate it accurately, but I have no doubt that I will have missed some hidden details. In any case, I am sure you will enjoy it!

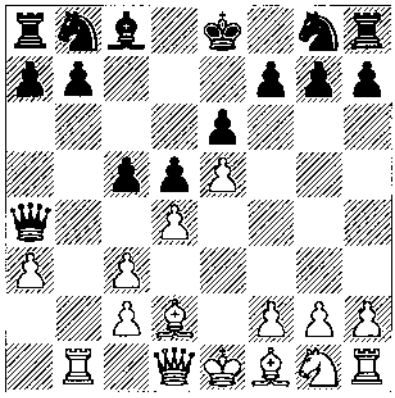
de Firmian – Rustemov
Politiken Cup, Copenhagen 2001

1 e4 e6 2 d4 d5 3 ♘c3 ♗b4 4 e5 c5 5 a3 ♗xc3+ 6 bxc3 ♕a5 7 ♗d2 ♕a4 8 ♖b1!? *(D)*

An unusual approach, and probably not best because in most cases the rook will have to return to a1 to protect the a-pawn.

I have won two games with 8 ♕b1!? c4 9 ♘e2 and prefer White here, because I don't feel that Black's position is fundamentally sound without his dark-squared bishop.

B

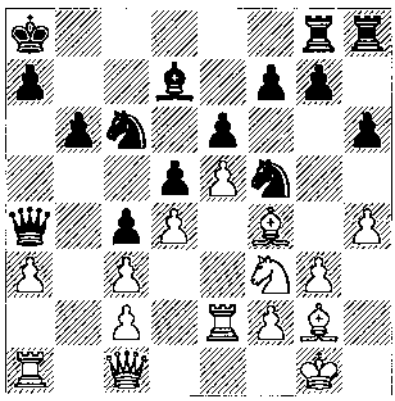


8...c4 9 ♕c1 ♘c6 10 ♘f3 ♘ge7 11 g3 b6 12 ♗g2 ♗d7 13 0-0 h6 14 ♖e1 0-0-0 15 ♖e2 ♘f5 16 h4 ♖dg8

16...h5?! secures the knight on f5, but the cost of ceding still more dark squares is too high; e.g., when Black plays ...f6 he will rarely threaten to take on e5 due to the weakness on g5.

17 ♖a1 ♔b7 18 ♗f4 ♔a8 *(D)*

W



It's curious that these two moves to improve the king will rebound on Black later, but in closed positions it is almost impossible to predict where your king will be safest in the long term, because the position can open in so many different ways. In my experience, whichever square you put your king on, you usually regret it later!

19 ♕d2 ♘fe7 20 h5 b5 21 ♘h4 ♘c8 22 g4 ♘b6 23 ♗g3 g6 24 ♔h2

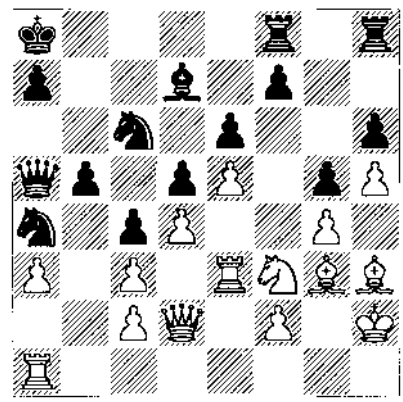
24 hxg6 fxg6 25 f4 is the principled approach, because in general White wants to open the position. However, in this case White also exposes his king to attack and it is difficult to keep coordination while protecting the g-pawn and the c3-pawn. 25...g5! 26 ♘f3 (26 fxg5 ♖xg5 27 ♗f3 ♘d8! 28 ♗f4 ♖gg8 29 ♗xh6? ♘f7) 26...gxf4 27 ♕xf4 ♖h7!? (anticipating ♗h4-f6 and allowing the rooks to double on the g-file; now White is under a little pressure) 28 ♗h4 ♗e8! 29 ♗f6 ♗g6 and there is no convenient way to defend the c2-pawn.

24...g5

24...♘e7!? seems more flexible.

25 ♘f3 ♕a5 26 ♖e3 ♖f8 27 ♗h3 ♘a4 *(D)*

W



The position is highly unbalanced, as French Winawers often are. However, White is probably somewhat better if only because both the main pawn-breaks, ...f6 and f4, will significantly increase the influence of White's unopposed dark-squared bishop. In the opening Black played ...c4 very early, something which French expert Lev Psakhis told me is "almost always a mistake". The problem for Black is that with the queenside closed, the sphere of activity moves to the kingside, where White usually has a natural advantage due not only to his extra space there (even more so here due to the pawn on h5) but also the influence of his bishops, which normally have access to the

kingside, but are cut off from the queenside due to the locked central structure. The following few moves seem to follow this pattern, and see White gradually taking control:

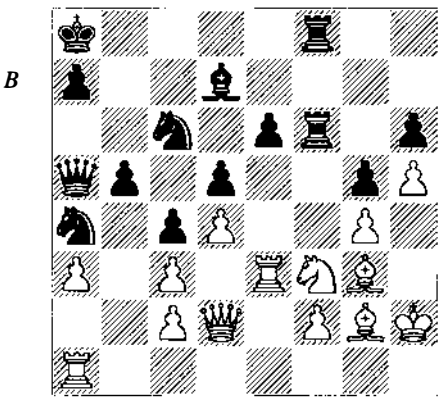
28 ♘g1

Intending f4, when there will be two weak pawns on the kingside.

28...f5 29 exf6 ♖xf6 30 ♘f3!

Back again – things have changed! White no longer needs to play f4 in the near future, because the position has already opened and instead he is trying to secure control of the dark squares before teeing up for a future f4 advance.

30...♖hf8 31 ♗g2 *(D)*



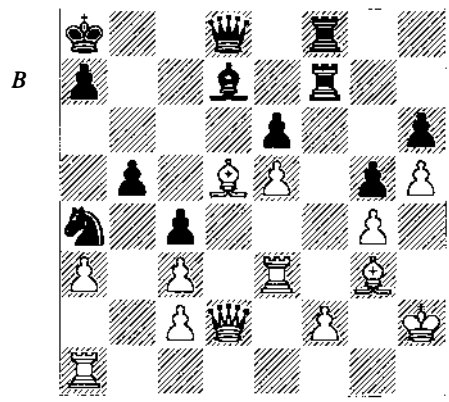
31...♕d8

Given the way the game develops, 31...♖f4!? is well worth considering here, above all as an attempt to reverse the unfavourable trend of the last few moves. Moreover, it might be justified on purely positional grounds because it makes it very difficult for White to achieve f4, and inconveniences him by attacking g4. If White takes (and sooner or later he will probably have to) then Black replaces his rook and can attempt to bring his a4-knight to e4 via b6, c8 and d6. Meanwhile, White is tied down to the defence of the a3-pawn, so it is not easy to make the presence of the extra rook felt. It would take deep analysis to reach a definitive assessment. My first impression was that Black is not significantly worse but a closer look suggests that the sacrifice is probably not fully adequate. 32 ♗xf4 ♖xf4 33 ♗h3 ♘b6 34 ♕e1 (34 ♘g1 ♘xd4!) 34...♕a4 (34...♘c8 35 a4! probably improves White's position; e.g., 35...bxa4 36 ♕c1!) 35 ♕e2 ♘c8 36 ♘e5 ♘xe5 37 ♖xe5 ♕a5 38 ♖e3 ♕c7 39 ♔g2 is promising for White because it is difficult to see a good answer to ♖f3. This was quite instructive for me, because my initial assessment was based on the realization that White would find it very hard to open the position with f4. This is true, but there are other ways to make use of the rooks!

32 ♘e5 ♘xe5?

This probably seemed like good news to Rustemov, because in general White wants to recapture on e5 with a piece. However, on this occasion, strategic objectives are trumped by tactical realities.

33 dxe5! ♖6f7 34 ♗xd5+! *(D)*



Crunch! Black suddenly has a precarious position and one can imagine the feeling of despair. To lose such a chunky centre pawn with check is devastating and this makes what follows all the more impressive.

34...♔b8!

Somehow the game goes on. It feels like White should be winning, but there are still lots of imbalances and plenty of chances for both sides to go wrong.

35 ♗e4

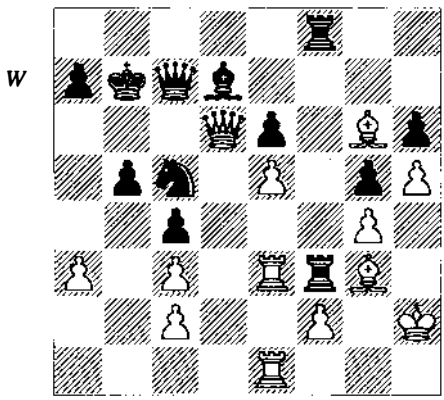
I know from experience that it can be hard to adjust to such developments. After 34 ♗xd5+ you feel like your work is done and that there should just be a few small details to take care of. However, it's not that simple. Although

White has won a big fat central pawn, the 'extra pawn' on f2 is very much backward and lies as a target for the black rooks. Moreover, both kings are potentially vulnerable and the time-control is approaching.

35...♕c7 36 ♕d6 ♘c5

A good square for the horse, which now has much more influence than it did on a4.

37 ♗g6 ♖f3 38 ♖ae1 ♔b7 *(D)*



39 ♖xf3?

This looks a bit hasty. 39 ♔g1 !? seems more flexible, when Black would probably have to wait with something like 39...a6. However, after 40 ♕d4 it is hard to see a convincing answer to the threat of taking on f3, playing ♖e3 and then f4.

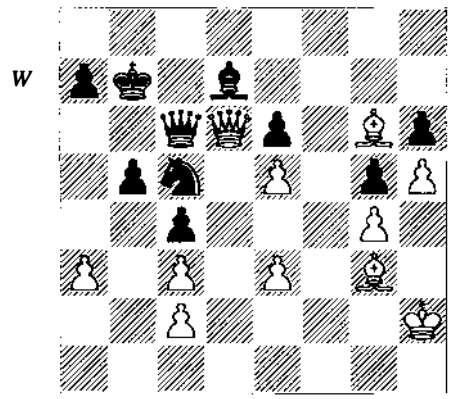
39...♖xf3 40 ♖e3?!

Fortieth moves are often a cause for regret and this move makes White's extra pawn even less significant. However, it's not clear that White had another constructive move.

40 ♕e7!? ♗c8 41 ♕e8!? intending ♕h8 looks promising, but then 41...♕d7! 42 ♕h8 ♕d2! seems to give Black enough counterplay to make a draw: 43 ♖f1 ♖xg3 44 ♔xg3 ♕f4+ 45 ♔h3 ♕f3+ 46 ♔h2 ♕f4+ 47 ♔h1 ♕f3+ 48 ♔h2.

40...♖xe3 41 fxe3 ♕c6! *(D)*

Now with the time-control reached, I suspect that Black was quite relieved to have a playable position while White was no doubt a little flummoxed that the game wasn't over yet. White's next move looks like a mistake because it permanently incarcerates the bishop on g6, but without



playing e4 it's hard to see a future for the g3-bishop. The main point of 42 e4 is to prepare a future sacrifice on g5 when the g6-bishop will play a key role in supporting the h-pawn towards its coronation.

42 e4

42 ♕f8 looks critical here, and if it works, it's all the more surprising that White didn't go for it on the next move with gain of time. However, the lines are very complicated and even for strong GMs it's very hard to keep track of queens and knights, so I'm not surprised that Nick decided not to risk it. 42...♘e4 43 ♕xh6 ♘d2 would now allow a draw by 44 ♕f8 ♘f3+ 45 ♔h3 ♘g1+ 46 ♔h2 ♘f3+, but White can also try to play for a win with minimal risk because the h-pawn is such a huge asset: 44 e4!? and then:

a) 44...♘xe4 45 ♕f8 ♘d2 (45...♕d5 46 ♕f3!) 46 ♔g1! and White has everything covered. It's curious that in general White's position seems to improve when Black starts taking pawns – I guess because this increases the scope of the bishops.

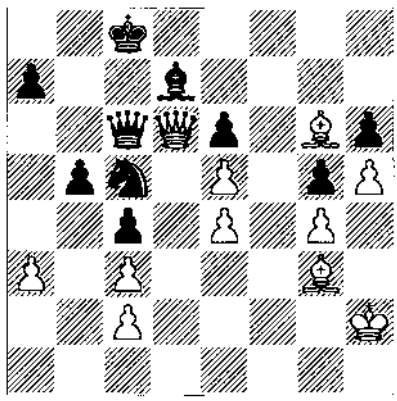
b) 44...♘f1+ 45 ♔h3 ♘xg3 (45...♕c5 46 ♕xg5! ♘xg3 and now White should play 47 ♕d2! {needless to say, this detail comes courtesy of Fritz}; instead, 47 ♔xg3 ♕g1+ is an immediate draw) 46 ♔xg3 ♕c5 47 ♔g2 ♕xe5 48 ♕h7! (an important finesse, displacing the black king) 48...♔c6 (48...♔c8 49 ♕g8+ ♔c7 50 ♕a8 ♔b6 {50...♕c5 51 h6 ♕e3 52 ♕f8!} 51 ♕d8+ ♔c6 52 ♕f8 is equivalent) 49 ♕f7 ♕xc3 50 ♕f2 and it seems that White is winning – the h-pawn is too strong.

42...♔c8!? *(D)*

This seems needlessly provocative on the face of it, because now White can win a pawn with gain of tempo. However, White had an annoying threat of ♕e7-g7 and this move also introduces the threat of ...♘xe4.

Moreover, there are a few hidden gremlins that Black has to watch out for; e.g., 42...♘a4? 43 ♕xc6+ ♗xc6 44 ♗f4!.

W



43 ♕d4

White decides to keep things solid, but I believe he could have taken the hot pawn on h6 and the queen could have lived to tell the king the tale: 43 ♕f8+ ♔b7 (43...♔c7 44 ♗f2! ♘xe4 45 ♗xa7) 44 ♕xh6 ♘xe4. Sitting here in the comfort of my own home, with a cup of hot tea and a friendly analysis engine, I can see that this counterplay is not sufficient for Black. However, over the board things always look different, and it is the mark of a good defender to play on the opponent's fears. In this case, de Firmian probably didn't want to seriously contemplate the possibility of losing and Rustemov had no choice but to play on this fear. This looks like serious counterplay, and after playing a move like 34 ♗xd5+ you don't really want to think about the possibility of losing. However, it appears that White has sufficient defensive resources.

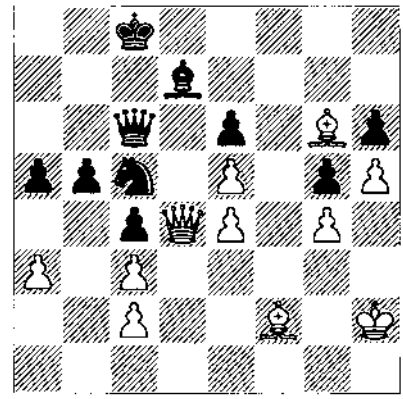
The first key move is 45 ♕f8!, keeping control of squares on the f-file and aiming to return home. 45...♘d2 (45...♕d5 46 ♕f3 ♗c6 47 ♗xe4 {there are other moves, but the simple approach seems to win} 47...♕xe4 48 ♕xe4 ♗xe4 49 ♗f2 and g5 falls, and then the bishop drops back, probably to e3, followed by g5-g6, king to g5 and then h6-h7, and before you know it, there will be a queen on h8) and now 46 ♔g1! is the second key move, minimizing the impact of the threat of ...♘f3+. Now White has control of the position and the h-pawn is ready to run.

43...a5!?

This is partly borne of necessity, because White threatened to win the a-pawn after ♗f2, but it is also the beginning of a magnificent conception.

44 ♗f2 *(D)*

B



44...♘b3!!

A stunning idea. Black judges that he can afford to sacrifice a piece because the g6-bishop is out of action. Moreover, this is just the beginning of the magic. Fritz finds it hard to understand of course, presumably because he doesn't have what it takes to establish the relationship between the g6-bishop being cut off, and the potential black passed pawn on b3 preventing White's dark-squared bishop, which is needed to cover b2, from sacrificing on g5.

The prosaic alternative is 44...♘a4 but if the knight had to be sidelined like this, Black would have no meaningful counterplay, and it would just be a matter of time before White organized a bishop sacrifice on g5 followed by queening the h-pawn. Rustemov seemed to realize that something special was called for, but at this stage he may not have realized that his spectacular idea actually gives him winning chances.

45 ♕e3

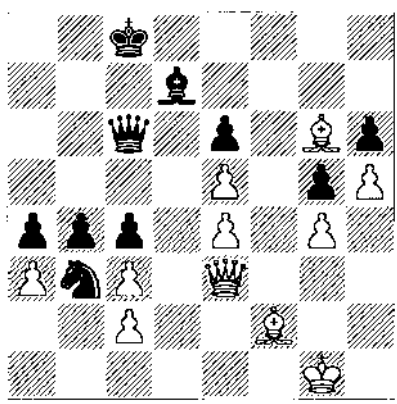
45 cxb3 cxb3 46 c4 looks promising at first, but it seems that Black still has his share of the chances. 46...bxc4 47 ♗e1 gives White some winning chances because the king can slowly be brought round to b2 before trying to 'wake up' the g6-bishop. However, 46...♕xc4! seems OK for Black, although after 47 ♕xc4+ bxc4 48 ♗d4 ♔c7 my first impression was that White is a piece up and the passed pawns will be safely blockaded. Neither of these things is strictly true: the extra piece is not felt and the black king can disrupt the blockade. In fact, Black might even be winning here: 49 ♔g3 ♔c6 50 a4 (50 ♔f2 ♔b5 51 ♔e3 ♔a4 52 ♗b2 c3 53 ♗xc3 ♔xa3 is winning for Black) 50...c3! 51 ♗xc3 ♔c5 and White loses, slowly but surely. It's as if the f7-bishop didn't matter at all – you might as well remove it from the board. It can go to f5 and offer itself as bait, but it will be ignored.

45...a4! 46 ♔g1

White probably didn't see what was coming, or may have seen it and not really believed it. 46 ♕b6!? ♘d2 47 ♕xc6+ ♗xc6 48 ♗c5 looks like a draw, but I can't think of a GM I know who would have opted out at this stage.

46...b4! *(D)*

W



I imagine Rustemov was really enjoying himself by now.

47 cxb4

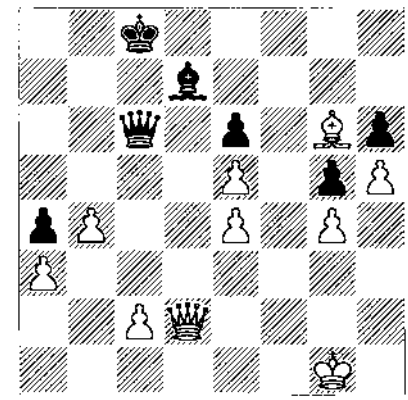
The continuation 47 axb4 a3 is obviously dangerous for White.

47...c3!

White's g6-bishop is still out of action and the knight will re-emerge on d2. All results are now possible.

48 ♗e1 ♘d2! 49 ♗xd2 cxd2 50 ♕xd2 *(D)*

B



All that to be three pawns down? Not at all. This is a great case of quality over quantity because Black is effectively a piece up due to the position of the bishop on g6 and White's doubled e-pawns are part of this problem. Moreover, White's a3-pawn is a target. It would be a nice bit of romance if Black was actually better here, but I don't think that's the case. However, it does seem that he is not worse, and it is risky for White to play for more.

50...♕c4 51 ♕f2

51 ♕d3!? looks steadier. After 51...♕a2 52 ♔f2 ♕b2 53 ♕a6+ ♔b8 54 ♕d6+ ♔c8 55 ♕f8+ ♔c7 Fritz still gives the position as winning for White, but all he can offer is to keep on checking the black king.

51...♕a2!

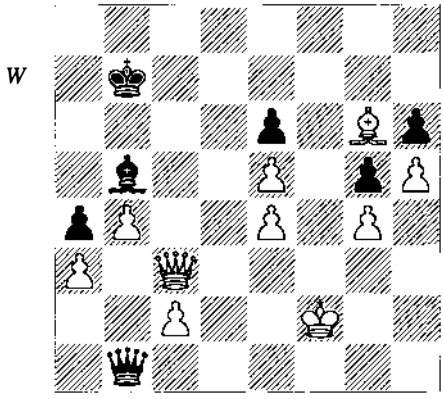
Carefully judging that there is no perpetual.

52 ♕c5+?

Perhaps the decisive error. The big question is whether White can take the h-pawn and survive. The answer seems to be yes, but this is a little counter-intuitive because when Black queens the a-pawn it will lead directly to mate, while the white queen on the h-file is not as dangerous. And yet... 52 ♕f8+ ♔b7 53 ♕xh6 ♕b1+ 54 ♔f2 ♕xc2+ 55 ♔f3 ♕c3+ 56 ♔f2 ♕xa3 57 ♕f8 ♕b2+. This is an awkward check – the king doesn't want to be on the back rank because Black will queen with check, it doesn't

want to be on f3 because it blocks the queen's return and it doesn't want to be on g3 because Black can take on e5 with check. However, it seems that after 58 ♔g1 a3 59 ♕d6! White causes trouble just in time to draw!

52...♔b7 53 ♕c3 ♕b1+ 54 ♔f2 ♗b5! *(D)*



At this point, I suspect that Nick acutely felt the estrangement of his bishop on g6.

55 ♔e3 ♕c1+ 56 ♕d2 ♕xa3+

A big one goes west.

57 c3 ♕a1 58 c4 ♕g1+ 59 ♔f3 ♕f1+ 60 ♔g3 ♕xc4

And another...

61 ♗f7 ♕xe4

And another...

62 ♗g6 ♕xe5+

And another. That's quite a harvest. In the space of six moves Black has gone from being three pawns down to being a pawn up. In return, White's bishop came back to life, but the cost was too high. Black now dominates the position and his a-pawn is on the verge of being reincarnated. Now 63 ♔g2 ♗c6+ 64 ♔f1 a3 contains numerous threats, including ...♗d5 and ...a2.

White must have been utterly bewildered, and decided to resign.

0-1

Conclusion: Be less defensive about defending!

This chapter has been relatively light on theorizing, and I'm going to keep it that way. The main thing I wanted to demonstrate was that defending can be a rich and joyous experience. If you want to improve your results, especially with Black, it helps if you can look forward to defending as much as you do to attacking, and not to pre-judge a position as good or bad superficially, because one side temporarily seems to be on the back foot.

10 Glorious Grinding

Persistence overcomes resistance
THEODORE ROOSEVELT

In most contexts, 'grind' is not a particularly positive word.

Millions of people are worn down by 'grinding poverty', and 'grinding to a halt' does not usually signal a happy ending. Grinding is also what we do to our teeth when we are nervous, and as any dentist will tell you, our teeth don't like this very much. And when we 'grind away' at work, it is usually because the work is mundane. The most familiar use of the term in a chess context is 'to grind down an opponent', by which we tend to mean gradually exhausting your opponent's resistance by playing a position remorselessly until the end, often provoking a losing blunder through the relative strength of your will.

This chapter is a kind of public relations exercise for 'grinding' in chess. I aim to show several faces of 'grinding' and to highlight that they are not all bad, and that some of them are even smiling. I have presented the material as a kind of story that begins with me displaying some very poor grinding qualities, then three examples from Luke McShane, in which he reveals the kinds of moves and attitudes that make grinding more rewarding, and then I end on perhaps my best grind to date, played after I had absorbed my lessons from the previous games in the chapter.

Grinding in chess is often distinctly unglamorous, and using games of over a hundred moves in which nothing much happened would make this clear. However, the games I have selected illustrate 'grinding' in a broader sense of the term, because what I am interested in is encouraging readers to keep their spirits up in positions that are fairly simplified. One rationale for this is that if you want to score well with the black pieces, you need to be able to win in a variety of different ways and especially important is the ability to continue playing for a win even in relatively simple positions. Of course you need to do this when you are White too, but in my experience it is particularly important when you are Black. The reason seems to be that with White you are trying to do something with the initiative, while as Black you are usually trying to absorb it. When you do successfully absorb it, the position is often considerably simplified, sometimes in your favour, but it can also be dead equal. In such cases you have to be able to at least attempt to play for a win, and have the right kind of mental state to make this happen. It is perhaps no coincidence then, that all the examples of grinding in this chapter are viewed from Black's perspective.

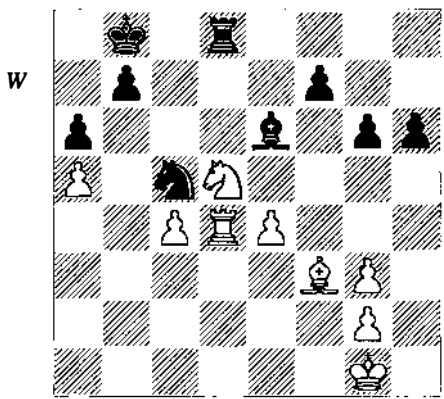
And the Rest is Just a Lack of Technique...

People often refer to this quality of winning simple positions as 'a matter of technique', but I wonder if this might be too grand a conception. Certainly, the next time you hear the expression, 'and the rest is just a matter of technique', I would advise you to look closely at what this 'just' implies because 'technique' is hard to understand and even harder to implement.

Part of the problem is that when we start thinking in terms of 'technique' we can inadvertently dull our tactical vigilance. I suspect this is because many of us associate good positional play with good endgame play and therefore we associate 'technique' with primarily positional considerations, especially preventing counterplay, 'the principle of two weaknesses', etc. However, **it is now clear to me that chess is a very concrete game, and this is especially true in the final phases of the game**. For instance, while it may be important

to prevent unnecessary counterplay, you need to calculate well to decide what is 'unnecessary'. If you avoid all complicated lines, just because they are complicated, you are unlikely to make the most of your resources. Indeed, **in most cases, 'technique' requires confidently transforming the position, and closely examining the variations relevant to the desired transformation.**

The following is a good illustration of the dangers of enjoying a good position for too long instead of transforming it into a different kind of advantage while this is still possible. I played the first part of this game very well and achieved a large positional advantage. However, I didn't really know what to do with it, and so this is a good example of bad technique: instead of improving my position, I tried to cling on to it, and so allowed it to rot.



Straeter – Rowson
Bundesliga 2000/1

After making sure that I had comfortably made 40 moves, I went outside for some fresh air where I noticed my team captain looking a little unhappy. Our team, Solingen, were heavy favourites in this match against Wattenscheid, but there were lots of upsets that day and it turned out that the result of my game had become crucial to the result of the match. I distinctly remember Herbert Scheid, my captain, rattling off likely results of the remaining games in German with some other team members, before turning to me with an air of disbelief and saying, in a thick German accent: "Vell! You must vin!"

At this point, I wasn't too troubled by this comment because I was fairly sure I would win one of White's pawns over the next few moves. I hadn't yet looked at the post-time-control position in depth, but I knew I had a huge structural advantage and it was hard to believe that White could protect all his pawns in the long term.

42 ♗d1!

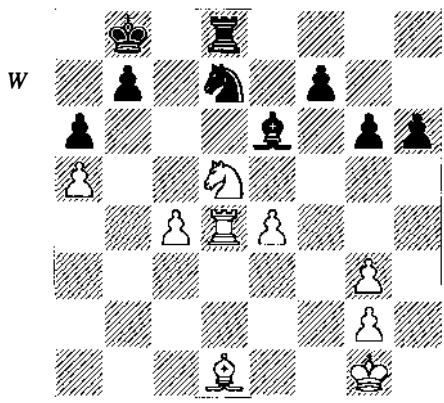
That said, I hadn't seen this until I returned to the board and was disappointed that the quick win of a pawn with ...♘b3xa5 was no longer possible. However, I felt that if I could get my knight to e5 it would be almost decisive because it attacks c4 and threatens to go to c6, so I wasn't too discouraged. But then I couldn't see a way to complete this manoeuvre without allowing annoying tactics, so I was a bit unsure how to proceed. I decided, a little whimsically, that I didn't really want to take his knight on d5 because this would improve his structure and give his rook access to c4 and b4. So in the end I decided to activate my rook, which is currently under-performing. However, this does not really meet the demands of the position.

42...h5?!

A month or so after this game, I showed this position to Hungarian GM Zoltan Gyimesi, who is generally considered a strong endgame player. He glanced at the position and almost immediately wanted to play 42...♗xd5. He felt this was the obvious move and that it did not entail any significant risk. The first things he emphasized were the importance of activating my king and getting rid of my weakness on b7. I think at the time I was too arrogant to think of b7 as weak. ("Weakness? Me? He's the one with the rotten pawns – I don't have any weaknesses in *my* position!") More generally, he made the point that I have to transform the position somehow and it's unlikely that I'll be able to do this without making some concessions to my opponent. Moreover, there is something to be said for comparing pieces in such situations. Although White's pawns do not compare favourably on the kingside, the situation is not so clear on the queenside, because his a5-pawn does bind my a6/b7 complex. Also, while his

rook and knight are already more active than their counterparts in this position, his bishop has a good deal of potential energy due to the fact that the e5 advance will always be a possibility. Moreover, his king has an obvious path to the centre while mine is stuck limply in the corner. In other words, Black may have a significantly better pawn-structure, but it's not all one-way traffic and White has certain compensating factors that make Black's path to victory a difficult one. My fear was, of course, that I might somehow lose control if I took on d5, but I should definitely have looked at this capture more than superficially and checked whether what I thought of as 'annoyance with ♖c4 and ♖b4-b6' was in any way real.

Black is better after taking on d5, but rather than give detailed lines after that move, I shall concentrate on a more effective way of making the same idea work. I have analysed this position for several hours now, not just to get to the heart of the position, but in an effort to unlearn some of the ideas and assumptions that prevented me from making the most of my chances. In any case, I believe that 42...♘d7! *(D)* is the most accurate move.



Getting my knight to e5 would be a big gain, mainly due to the threat of ...♘c6, so White has to prevent this: 43 ♘b6 (43 ♘f6 ♔c7 44 ♘d5+ ♗xd5 comes to the same thing) 43...♔c7 44 ♘d5+ ♗xd5! (44...♔d6 45 ♘b6+ ♔e5 46 ♖d2 ♘xb6 47 ♖xd8 ♘xc4 looks promising, but after 48 ♗b3 ♘xa5 49 ♗d5! Black will have to swap one of his queenside duo for the e-pawn and then a draw seems quite likely) 45 cxd5 b5! (the most straightforward approach; 45...♔d6 is also promising, when White should play 46 ♖c4! {to prevent ...♖c8-c1} 46...♖b8 47 ♔f2 ♘e5 48 ♖c3 b5 49 axb6 ♖xb6 50 ♗e2 with good drawing chances, because Black is not in a position to give proper support to his passed a-pawn) 46 axb6+ ♔xb6 47 ♔f2 a5! 48 ♔e3 ♔c5 49 ♖a4 ♖a8! and Black is taking control.

So let us think about what happened there. My first mistake was to decide that I didn't want to take on d5 in general, before I had a good alternative plan. This happened because I was thinking too structurally, and not enough about the activity of the pieces, especially my king. My second mistake was to underestimate White's position. It looks terrible at the moment, but this is largely visual, and as we see in the game, it has a certain amount of potential. I guess good technique is not just knowing what to do (take on d5), but also when (soon!) and how (after ...♘d7, in such a way that I can get my rook behind my a-pawn) to do it.

43 ♔f2 ♖h8 44 ♔e3 h4 45 gxh4 ♖xh4

At the time I thought this was a clever way of activating my rook, but now it just looks like I wasted time and removed one of my opponent's weaknesses.

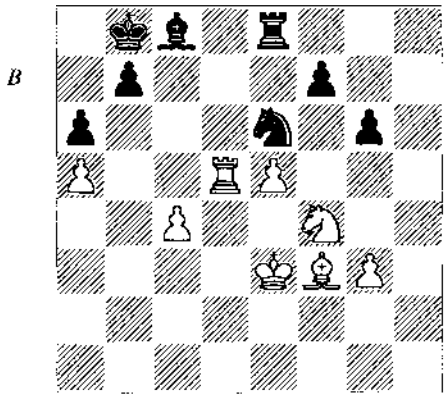
46 ♘f4 ♗c8 47 g3 ♖h8?!

This move is hard to understand, given that I was trying to activate the rook. I can only guess that I wanted to prevent any idea based on his rook landing on d8, so again this looks like the mistake of preventing bogus and largely illusory counterplay instead of looking at the position properly to see if the counterplay is really there at all.

Now I would certainly have played 47...♖h1. It's always hard to know exactly how and when it will matter, but in general you should maximize the activity of your pieces when you can. In this case it shows in the variation 48 ♖d5 ♘e6 49 e5 ♘xf4 50 gxf4 ♗e6 (with the rook on h8 White could defend c4 with ♖d4 here) 51 ♖d2 ♗xc4 52 ♗f3 ♖b1, when Black retains winning chances.

48 ♖d5 ♘e6 49 ♗f3 ♖e8 50 e5 *(D)*

My opponent offered a draw with this move. Had I accepted, the match would also have been



drawn, and this would have been a huge disappointment for our team, but not a complete disaster. In any case, I didn't really come to terms with the fact that my position had deteriorated over the last few moves, and I felt somehow possessed, as if I had to win this game at all costs. I arrogantly rejected the offer with an immediate "no" and this arrogance tainted my thinking in what follows. **I now think it's a useful rule always to consider draw offers carefully – not so much for the offer itself – but to be sure that the offer reinforces your objective appraisal of the situation, rather than waking up all your egocentric gremlins.**

50...♘d8

50...♘c7 was perhaps a better practical try. White has to choose between sacrificing the exchange and allowing his rook to be 'trapped' on c5. However, after 51 ♖c5 Black can't take advantage of the fact that White's rook cannot move. Just as in the game, the c5-rook is in a cage, but it is a gilded cage and the rook serves, at the very least, to keep Black's c7-knight and the king out of play.

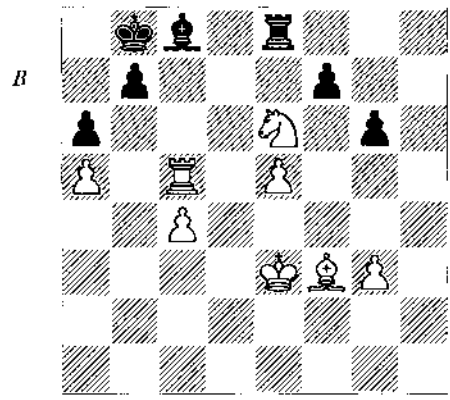
51 ♖c5

Here, I suddenly noticed that White's rook only had the d5-square, and that it was otherwise trapped. I probably placed too much emphasis on this fact simply because it was the first non-structural advantage I had taken seriously! Another way to look at this is that I had been trapped in the dimension of Quality, and only now was I beginning to think in terms of Opportunity (see Chapter 7).

51...♘e6

51...♗d7!? was my original idea before getting excited about trapping his rook. However, White is now equal. He can hold his weaknesses on a5 and g3 without losing coordination.

52 ♘xe6 *(D)*



52...fxe6?!

In light of what follows, this looks like a terrible move and after the game some of my teammates took me to task for this decision. However, it is not as bad as it looks and was not the real reason that I lost the game. After 52...♗xe6 53 ♗d5 I realized that the position was probably drawn and wanted to keep more complexity in the position. 53...♖h8 54 ♔f4 ♖h5 55 ♗xe6 (an important move; otherwise Black might still win the game: 55 g4 g5+ 56 ♔g3 ♖h4 57 ♗xe6? {57 ♗f3 ♖h8 58 ♗d5 ♖c8 59 ♖xc8+ ♔xc8 60 ♔f2 ♔c7 61 ♔e3 b6 gives Black some winning chances due to the strength of the outside passed pawn} 57...fxe6 58 ♔f3 ♖h3+ 59 ♔g2 ♖d3 60 ♔f2 ♖d7 61 ♔f3 ♖c7 is winning for Black) 55...fxe6 56 ♔g4 ♖f5 57 ♔h4 =.

53 ♔f4 ♖f8+ 54 ♔g4

For some reason I missed this completely, perhaps simply because I thought the king would either have to go backwards or forwards, and forgot he could also go sideways! In any case, there was a lot of scriptwriting going on here. I envisaged various scenes of my bishop becoming active, and thought it was very clever to play the anti-positional move ...fxe6. However, obviously I had lost my sense of danger, perhaps because at the time this game was played, I hadn't lost a game for a while. 54

♔e3? ♗d7 55 ♗e4 g5 is the kind of position I was looking forward to. There is no danger for Black and I do have the plan of a timely ...g4 in conjunction with ...♗a4-d1-f3. Although even if I achieve that, I'm not sure it's winning.

54...♖d8 55 ♔h4!

This disturbed me because he played it quite quickly and with some confidence. I hadn't seen it coming and overreacted. I was also getting short of time, and to compound these difficulties, we had recently moved seats to get out of a particularly intrusive sunbeam so I had to readjust in more ways than one.

55...♖h8+?

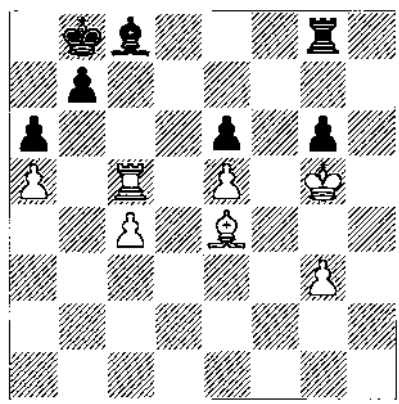
Consistent with my previous play, in the sense that I miss the chance to play an active move! 55...♖d3! seems to draw as long as I keep my rook attacking the bishop or the g-pawn: 56 ♗g2 ♖d2 57 ♗f1 ♖d1 58 ♗e2 ♖d2 59 ♗g4 ♖d3, etc.

56 ♔g5 ♖h3 57 ♔g4!

I missed the strength of this simple retreat. I felt like we were going round in circles and I began to lose my bearings.

57...♖h8 58 ♗e4 ♖g8 59 ♔g5 *(D)*

B



And now it's completely winning for White and I began to have a horrible sinking feeling.

59...♗d7 60 ♔f6 g5 61 ♗g6 g4 62 ♗f7 ♖h8 63 ♔e7 ♗c6 64 ♗xe6 ♔c7 65 ♗d5 ♖h5 66 ♗g2

I was relying on the sweet zugzwang idea 66 e6 ♖f5! but even this doesn't seem to work: 67 ♗xc6 ♖xc5 68 ♗d5! ♖xa5 69 ♔f8 and the e-pawn goes through, winning for White.

66...♖f5 67 ♗e4 ♖h5 68 ♔f6 ♖h3 69 e6 ♖h6+ 70 ♗g6 ♔d6 71 ♖xc6+ bxc6 72 e7 ♖xg6+ 73 ♔xg6 ♔xe7 74 ♔f5 ♔d6 75 ♔xg4 ♔c5 76 ♔f5 ♔xc4 77 g4 1-0

A truly painful defeat, compounded by the fact that it meant our team lost the match, and with it, any realistic chance of winning the league that year. In any case, this game made a deep impression on me and I resolved to understand what happened, not so much on the board, but psychologically – in terms of my competitive attitude.

Staying Power

In a period of twelve months during 2002-3, Luke McShane moved from being a promising 2546 to a world-beating 2649. This growth period took place in the same year that I was studying at Harvard, and completely inactive as a chess-player, but it was great to watch it happen from afar. I have mentioned Luke a lot in this book, and might thereby give the impression that I am his trainer (or student!). However, the main reason for making use of his games and thoughts is that I am very familiar with them. I have known Luke since he was eight and we have been friends for several years.

By Luke's own admission, the progress he made in 2002-3 was largely the result of a steady resolve to give his best effort at the board in every game. However, even before he started making massive strides, I began to notice the impact of this kind of effort. I think the main thing needed to play positions like those we are about to consider is not so much 'technique' but 'staying power', or simpler still, 'being there' – just enjoying the experience of continuing to play chess, when others might have agreed a draw and be in the analysis room considering how the game might have developed.

Summerscale – McShane
British Ch, Torquay 2002

1 ♘f3 d5 2 c4 c6 3 e3 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 g6 5 d4 ♗g7 6 ♗e2 0-0 7 0-0 ♗g4?! 8 cxd5! ♘xd5 9 e4 ♘xc3 10 bxc3 ♘d7

Luke's opening play is not too impressive, but he succeeds in gaining an unbalanced position and begins to outplay his opponent.

11 ♖b1?!

11 a4!? makes more sense to me, in order to gain space and soften up the queenside. After 11...♕c7 12 a5 e5 13 ♗e3 ♖fe8 14 ♕c2 White's position is a little more comfortable.

11...♕c7 12 h3

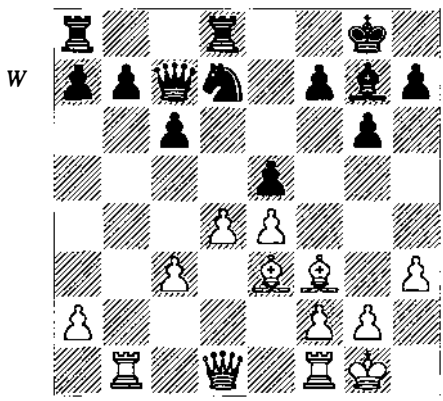
I am not sure there was any need for this, because the g4-bishop is destined to take the f3-knight in any case. 12 e5!? is worth considering here, as an attempt to keep Black's position cramped.

12...♗xf3 13 ♗xf3 e5

Luke's comment: "Two bishops and the centre ought to be ±, but I actually think I'm fine." At this juncture I agree, but I also think that '±' and 'Black is fine' are not mutually exclusive and this issue is examined in more detail in Chapter 11. In any case, White has made a couple of casual moves and now Black has a clear plan of targeting the d4 point and forcing a structural concession.

14 ♗e3 ♖fd8! *(D)*

14...♖ad8 leaves the e-file for the f8-rook, but 14...♖fd8 allows a quick ...♘f8-e6, which is not easy for White to deal with.

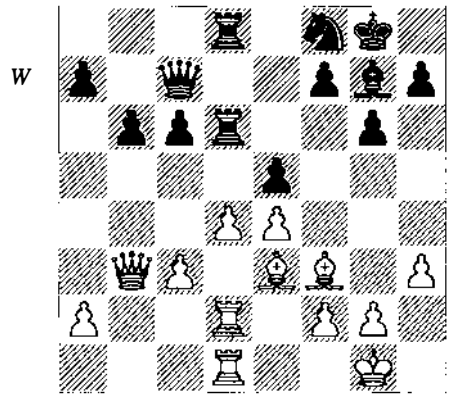


15 ♕b3 b6 16 ♖fd1 ♘f8 17 ♖d2?!

17 a4 ♘e6 18 ♕c4!? looks more purposeful, and White seems to have some advantage in that case.

17...♖d6 18 ♖bd1 ♖ad8 *(D)*

19 ♗g5



This looks like the sort of move you play when you don't know what else to do. 19 d5!? is better, even if it looks like it's playing into Black's hands. 19...cxd5 20 ♖xd5 ♖xd5 21 ♖xd5 ♖xd5 22 exd5 ♘d7 superficially seems to favour Black, who is looking forward to a timely ...f5 and ...e4. However, Black is a little tender on the light squares and White can take advantage of this with 23 ♕a4! intending ♕c6, when he seems to be active enough to compensate for his structural problems.

19...♗f6!

19...♖e8 20 ♗e3 leaves Black without a constructive way to play on because 20...♘e6 21 ♗g4! is annoying.

20 ♗xf6

Luke points out that White can't solve his problems by tactical means: 20 ♗e3 ♘e6 21 ♗g4 exd4 22 cxd4 ♘xd4 23 ♕c4 intends ♗f4, but 23...♘b5! 24 ♗f4 ♖xd2 25 ♗xc7 ♖xd1+ 26 ♗xd1 ♖xd1+ 27 ♔h2 ♘xc7 gives Black a decisive material advantage.

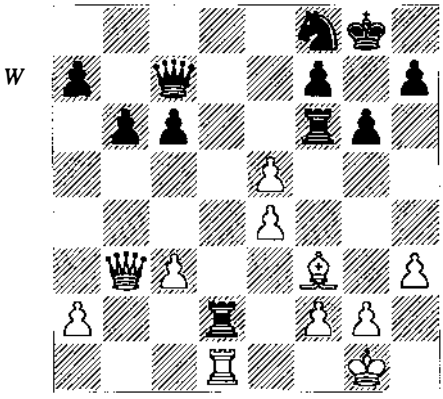
20...♖xf6 21 dxe5

21 ♕b2 ♘e6!? 22 ♗g4 is possible, but Black can keep his knight: 22...♘g5 23 dxe5 ♖xd2 24 ♕xd2 ♕xe5 with similar play to the game.

21...♖xd2 *(D)*

22 exf6

White decides to allow all the rooks to come off. The alternative 22 ♖xd2 ♕xe5 23 ♖d8 ♔g7 looks risky for White, because the rook on f6 is well-placed for attack. Only Fritz would consider playing into 24 ♖a8 ♘e6 25 ♖xa7 ♘g5, when White would need, at the very least, strong nerves to hang on.



22...♖xd1+ 23 ♕xd1 ♘d7 24 ♕a4?!

Luke gives 24 ♕d2!? ♘xf6 25 ♕g5 ♔g7 26 e5 ♘g8 (26...♘d7 27 ♕e7) as slightly better for Black, but I'm not too sure about this assessment. White could perhaps do even better with 24 ♕d4! c5 25 ♕d5 ♘xf6 26 ♕g5 ♔g7 27 e5 ♘g8. Again Luke's original notes give Black a slight edge, but making Black play ...c5 is a big gain for White because White's bishop increases in scope. I don't think White is worse here.

24...♘xf6 25 ♕d4

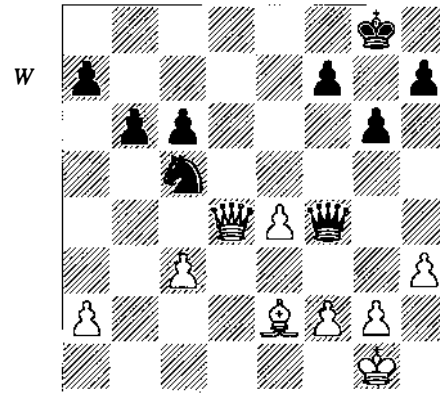
I suspect White should have taken the chance to play 25 e5. After 25...♕xe5 (25...♘d7!? 26 e6 fxe6 27 ♕xc6 ♕xc6 28 ♗xc6 ♘c5 and Black's advantage is not negligible because in positions where both sides have pawn weaknesses, such as this one, the knight's versatility tends to be more important than the bishop's superior range) 26 ♕xc6 White shouldn't lose, but I suppose Black has good reason to play on. In the game White had an asset in the form of his kingside majority, while here he has only the disadvantage of the weakened queenside structure and the feeling that the queen and knight might start to coordinate with intent. However, this pawn exchange significantly increases the scope of White's bishop and eliminates Black's queenside majority, thereby effectively equalizing the game.

25...♘d7 26 ♗g4 ♘c5

26...♘e5 27 ♗e2 leaves Black without a good answer to the pending f4.

27 ♗e2 ♕f4 *(D)*

The first moment in the game where White probably felt some serious discomfort.



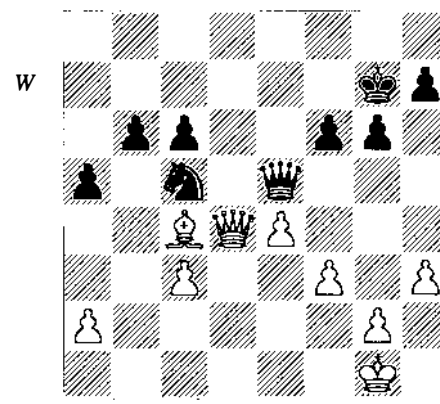
28 ♕d8+ ♔g7 29 ♕d4+ f6

29...♔h6 is also possible. After 30 ♗f3 ♘e6!? 31 ♕d7 ♘g5 32 ♕xa7 (32 ♕xc6 ♕c1+ 33 ♔h2 ♘xf3+ 34 gxf3 ♕f1!) 32...♕c1+ 33 ♔h2 ♕b2 Black keeps a certain amount of pressure.

30 ♗f3 ♕c7 31 ♗e2 ♘e6 32 ♕d2 ♕e7 33 ♗c4 ♘c5 34 f3

It must have felt good to extract this concession. Black cannot take advantage of it directly, but the fact that this move, further weakening the dark squares, is necessary, highlights that Black is fully in control.

34...♕e5 35 ♕d4 a5! *(D)*



The queenside majority starts to wake up. In addition to the knight being a little more purposeful than the bishop, Black has the advantage that his pawn-majority is relatively mobile. In my experience, relative pawn mobility is one of the most underestimated positional imbalances.

The nature of pawn mobility is not so easy to formalize because it can be related to many different factors, but if your opponent's majority is stifled and yours is free to advance, it's almost like being a pawn up, and in this case this imbalance is already almost decisive.

36 ♔f2 b5! 37 ♗e2 b4!

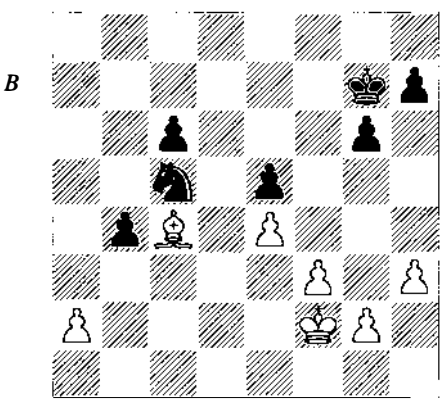
Forcing a favourable queen exchange. In the resulting structure, White finds it hard to create a passed pawn and Black is completely safe due to his control of the dark squares.

38 ♕xe5?

An understandable mistake, especially with the time-control approaching. However, the tense 38 ♗c4 looks more tenacious and forces Black to be accurate. 38...bxc3 39 ♕xe5 fxe5 40 ♔e2 ♔f6 41 ♔d1 h5!? 42 ♔c2 h4 43 ♔xc3 ♔g5 (43...g5!? is safer, but also makes it harder for Black to win) and Black is probably better, but the position has become double-edged.

38...fxe5 39 cxb4 axb4 40 ♗c4? *(D)*

40 h4! eases White's task significantly because it makes it much less likely that he will be left with a weak h-pawn (see note to 40...♔f6). Perhaps White was scared of 40...b3!?, when Black quickly generates a passed pawn. In the cool light of day this is not scary, but in international time-limits, the 40th move signals the time-control, and few players are comfortable with allowing a move that radically changes the position before having time to consider it properly. In any case, after 41 axb3 ♘xb3 42 g3 White is not worse.



40...♔f6?

Failing to capitalize on White's error, but again, the 'move 40 excuse' is a reasonable one.

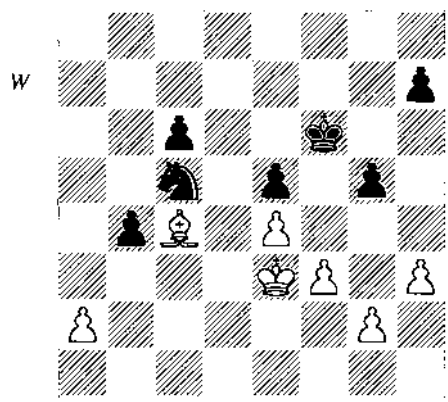
40...g5! makes an important difference, as we see in the game.

But why does this matter so much? Whether or not Black plays ...g5, White can't be prevented from playing f4. The issue is not so much the achievement of f4, but White's h-pawn and whether it remains as a weakness. If Black gets ...g5 in, there is no way for White to play f4 without the h-pawn remaining a weakness, while if White had achieved h4, either Black would have had to exchange another pair of pawns on g5 (thus eliminating the h-pawn), or he would have had to allow White to play f4 without being in any danger of ceding the e5-square because the f4 point is supported by g3, and not challenged by a pawn on g5.

41 ♔e3?!

Last chance for 41 h4!. Failing to play this may well have been the difference between losing the position and holding it.

41...g5! *(D)*



It is difficult to know how to annotate from here until the end of the game. Black is clearly better and he gradually improves his position. At first, it didn't feel to me like White's position was lost here, but I cannot see any big idea or significant improvement to save the position.

42 g3 ♘d7 43 ♔d3

43 f4 exf4+ 44 gxf4 gxf4+ 45 ♔xf4 ♘e5 followed by ...c5-c4-c3 and then Black will be able to target the e4- or h3-pawn.

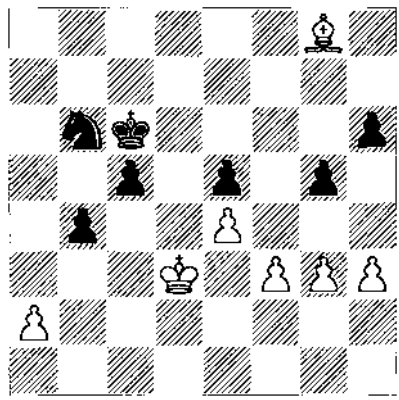
43...♔e7 44 ♗g8 ♘f6 45 ♗b3 c5 46 ♔e3

46 ♔c4 ♔d6 and the threat of ...♘h5 forces a major concession.

46...♘h5 47 ♔f2 ♘g7 48 ♗g8 h6 49 ♔e3 ♘h5 50 ♔f2 ♘g7 51 ♔e3 ♘h5 52 ♔f2 ♘f6 53 ♗b3 ♔d6 54 ♗f7 ♔e7 55 ♗b3 ♘d7

Notice that Luke is following the old 'repeat the position to dull the opponent's vigilance' advice. As I mention in my notes to my game against Ivan Sokolov in Chapter 6, this advice is worth following in general, but it should not be done automatically because sometimes repeating the position does more harm than good.

56 ♔e3 ♘b6 57 ♔d3 ♔d7 58 ♗g8 ♔c6 *(D)*



Here he comes, heading to a4. It looks easy now, but at the time I felt it probably wasn't possible to go too far with the king, due to f4 and the emergence of a passed e-pawn. However, Luke makes full use of his resources and finds a way to time the critical variations so that the tricks work in his favour.

59 ♗f7 ♔d6 60 ♗b3 ♔d7 61 ♗g8 ♔c6 62 ♗f7 ♔b5 63 ♗e8+ ♔a5 64 ♗f7 ♔a4 65 ♗c4 ♔a3 66 ♗b3 ♔b2 67 ♗g8 ♔b1

Now ...♘a4 is the threat, probably followed by ...♘b2 and ...c4-c3.

68 ♗f7 ♘a4! 69 f4 exf4 70 gxf4 gxf4 71 e5 ♘b6 72 ♔e4

72 e6 ♘c8 is also winning for Black – one of the pawns will be promoted.

72...c4 73 e6 c3 74 e7 ♘c8!

It was crucial to see this on move 68 and I am sure that Luke did because these last few moves were all played fairly quickly.

0-1

On a personal note, I watched the last couple of hours of this game live and remember feeling deeply impressed by Luke's determination to win, from what had initially looked like an unpromising position. Luke has played much more spectacular games, but there was something about this gritty display that convinced me he would sooner or later become a world-class player.

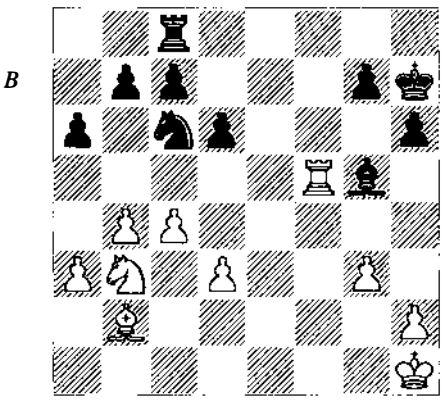
Gumption Revisited

Peace of Mind isn't at all superficial really, it's the whole thing. That which produces it is good maintenance. That which destroys it is poor maintenance.
ROBERT PIRSIG

In *7DCS* I argued that 'gumption' was an antidote to the sin of *'looseness'*, but now I also think that it is required for maximizing winning chances in relatively simple positions. 'Gumption' is an old Scots word, with various shades of meaning. The clearest account I have come across is the following, by Guy Claxton (1984): "Gumption is the ability to remain intelligent in the face of frustration. It means being able to review and re-evaluate the new situation, so that I can discover ways of achieving the desirable consequence other than the one that has just failed ... Gumption traps are so powerful because they are more than disappointing: they are invalidating. Suddenly I am exposed as less than I hope or believe myself to be. Less competent, less knowledgeable, less powerful, less in control."

Gumption in this sense means resilience, it means not giving up. But it's more than that too. It means staying interested in the task at hand even when you can't make the task go the way you want it to. In a chess context, gumption means having the presence of mind and attentiveness to notice important details in the position, long after others have given up and/or agreed a draw. **It is not so much the will to win that drives you on, but the will to keep on playing and the will to keep on looking for reasons to keep on playing!**

I hope this comes out in the following game. By way of background, Luke had already scored 3/3 that weekend, including a victory with Black against Ivan Sokolov. However, in the following game, playing against somebody rated almost 300 points below himself, it looked like his winning streak would come to an end. Both sides played quite sensibly in the opening and the following position was reached:



M. Becker – McShane
French Team Ch, Montpellier 2004

The position is about equal. White has some extra space on the queenside, but in view of the reduced material, this does not constitute an advantage and can even be a liability in some positions. White has some mild coordination problems, and doesn't control e1, e2 or e3, but this can all be dealt with. What intrigues me about this game is Luke's resolve to win it, combined with his joy in playing it.

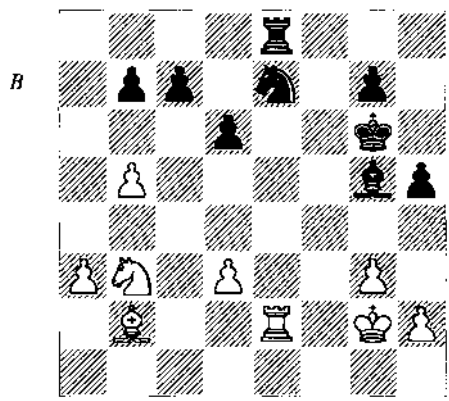
29...♔g6 30 ♖f2 ♖e8 31 ♔g2 h5!

This unassuming move is very important later, when Luke needs to put a knight on f5 without allowing g4. This is a good example of how positional judgement works. At the moment, the main purposes of ...h5 are to give the g5-bishop the option of retreating to h6 if White plays h4, and gaining a little space. However, to me at least, it also *looks* like a good move more generally because it gains space and increases the scope of Black's position. Moreover, controlling g4 seems worthwhile, even though it's hard to explain why at this stage.

32 b5

This works out well, but it was by no means forced. In light of how things developed, it might be thought of as a mistake of doing something when 'being' was enough. White could also have considered 32 h3!? vying for control of the g4-square! Yes, I know, g4 doesn't seem to matter very much. But in such quiet positions tiny details often add up to something significant. In this case, the larger question is: What can Black do to apply some sort of pressure, to keep the game going at all? Black's last move, 31...h5 was quietly purposeful, but there is usually a limit to the number of useful moves like that you can play before you have to do something. More to the point, in a position like this, it seems to me, it is hard to do anything significant without weakening the position. The two most obvious ways to improve the position are to enter with the rook on the e-file or play ...♘e5 and neither seems to get anywhere (32...♘e5 33 ♖e2; 32...♖e3 33 ♖f3 ♖e2+ 34 ♖f2 ♖e1 35 ♖f1, etc.) so I am not sure what Luke would have done here, but I am confident that he would have found a way to keep the position alive. **The important thing to remember in such positions is that your first duty is not to make any mistakes. It is not so easy for your opponent to do nothing. If you just keep playing moves, opportunities often present themselves.**

32...axb5 33 cxb5 ♘e7 34 ♖e2 *(D)*



34...♖a8

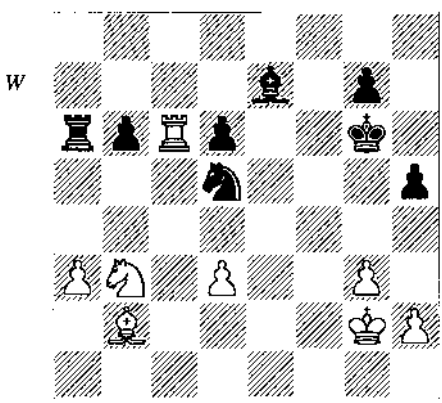
In view of the simplification that follows, I wonder if Black might have considered the

preventative move 34...♖d8!?. The idea is simply to protect d6 so that b6 is no longer a threat. It is quite an elaborate ploy, but White has seriously compromised his structure and now has a weakness on the half-open a-file and on d3. Black has also been given a central square for his knight on d5. Such a coy move will certainly encourage further activity from White, but I am not sure if it really leads anywhere: 35 ♘d4 (35 ♘a5 ♘d5! looks fine; 35 a4!? obliges 35...b6 which is not ideal, but it's important to prevent a5 and the possibility of a passed a-pawn, and after 36 ♘d4 ♘d5 the weakness of the c6-square doesn't seem as important as the weakness of the pawns on a4 and d3) 35...♘d5 36 ♘e6 ♖g8 with ...♗f6 to follow. I have noticed that some players find it hard to imagine playing in such a manner and reject moves like ...♖d8 or ...♖g8 because they seem too 'passive'. This amounts to a conflation of defensive moves and passive play. **A player's skill depends on his ability to distinguish between temporary restraint and pathological timidity. The former is essential for good chess, but is often neglected due to fear of the latter.**

35 b6 ♘d5

35...c6 36 ♖e6+ ♔f7 37 ♖xd6 ♖a6 is mentioned as an interesting possibility by Luke, but he missed it at the time. It seems that White's activity compensates for the structural damage after 38 ♘c5 ♖xb6 39 ♗e5 but the game is still very much alive.

36 bxc7 ♘xc7 37 ♖e4 ♖a6! 38 ♖b4 b6 39 ♖c4 ♘d5 40 ♖c6 ♗e7 *(D)*



It seems that Black is on the defensive, but White's initiative is mainly visual and has no strategic basis. Moreover, Black's position has lots of *potential* (see Chapter 13) and this is every bit as important as the initiative here.

41 ♘d2?!

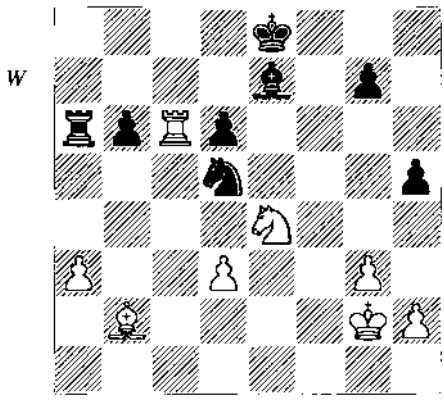
Assuming that White would have been happy with a draw, this looks like a missed opportunity. 41 ♘c5! is better and it's hard to see what White was afraid of here because it looks like a sure path to simplification, with Black having to be a little careful on the way. After 41...♖a7 White may have looked at 42 ♘e6!? and then rejected it, but at this stage he still has an opt-out (42 ♘e4 obliges Black to play 42...♖c7 43 ♖xc7 ♘xc7 and it's hard to imagine Black creating winning chances without the rooks on), so there was no reason to reject 41 ♘c5 unless there was a good alternative. Now 42...♖a5!? prevents White from taking on g7 and this might have scared White away from playing 41 ♘c5.

This would only be true if 41 ♘c5 was inextricably linked with 42 ♘e6, but 42 ♘e4 was a good alternative. However, this phenomenon of associating two moves so closely that the rejection of one leads to the rejection of the other is very common. I think of it as **'matchmaking'**. Matchmaking happens when we associate one move too closely with another, as if we were trying to get them together. This can happen with two moves from one side (e.g. 41 ♘c5 and 42 ♘e6) but also when one of our own moves is associated too closely with a particular reply by the opponent.

In any case, after 42...♖a5!?, 43 ♘xg7 ♖b5! 44 ♗d4 ♖b3 is actually just equal, but we can see why White would have preferred to keep things simple. I don't know what White was thinking around here, but in such positions it is important to be clear of your own motivation in terms of the result you are playing for. You don't have to be steadfastly aiming for a win or a draw, but you need to be sure you are not unconsciously rejecting lines that lead to a draw in a position where, on a more careful conscious inspection, a draw would seem to be a good result.

41...♔f7 42 ♘e4 ♔e8! *(D)*

Luke tells me he was quite close to playing 42...♔e6?, when 43 ♘c5+! would have been a nasty shock.



43 ♖c8+ ♗d8

I find it is instructive that even when his pieces seem to be awkwardly placed, Luke sees beyond the impression that Black is defending. White is still not worse, but from a psychological point of view he might have become a bit optimistic here and this probably undermined his ability to find accurate moves a few moves later. It was also possible to play 43...♔d7 44 ♖g8 ♘e3+ 45 ♔f3 ♘f5 but there is no reason to give White such an active rook on g8.

44 ♖c6 ♘e3+!

44...♗c7 45 ♘c3! works out well for White.

45 ♔f3 ♘f5

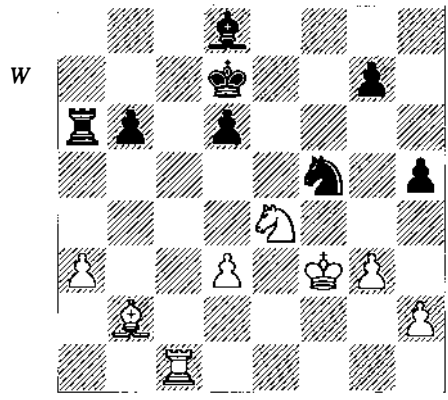
Remember that 31...h5 move? This is a good example of positional chess in action. ...h5 was not played with the idea of allowing ...♘e3-f5 later, but because it seemed like a generally useful move. Sometimes it takes several moves for the utility of a useful move to become apparent!

46 ♖c1

46 ♘xd6+ ♔d7 47 ♘xf5 ♔xc6 48 ♘xg7 would be playing into Black's hands. 48...♗e7, 48...h4 and 48...♖a5 all look good.

46...♔d7 *(D)*

Now we see the first traces of Black's advantage. The king on d7 and knight on f5 are both quite happy, Black's rook has quite a lot of scope (access to a4 and a5) and the ...d5 break will disturb White's coordination. Again sensing an impasse, White decides 'to do something'.



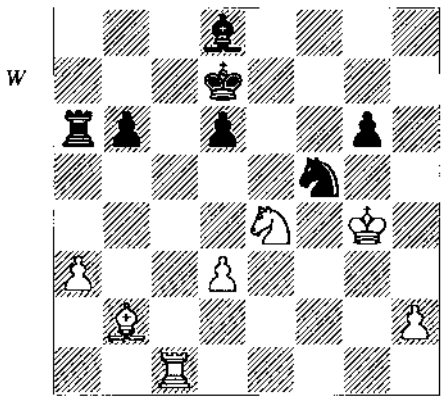
47 g4

With hindsight, this looks like it might have been a mistake, because in the lines that follow, the secure knight on f5 is a big asset for Black. However, it's strangely difficult to find constructive moves for White. 47 h3!? was my first choice but after 47...d5 everything seems to be a little bit awkward.

In such situations it is important not to expect your decisions to be straightforward. Chess does have a kind of rhythm and positions can suddenly become sharp or complex when we least expect it, or more importantly, when we least desire it. At such moments we have to change gears. Failure to do so can mean that our minds are not receptive to the types of ideas that we need in order to make the best moves. What is happening here is that the forces are becoming integrated again, after a period of relative separation. The integration itself is not problematic and it is not a sign that White has gone wrong, but a sign that he needs to think slightly differently and move into a more concrete mindset. That said, after writing this I assumed I could demonstrate a clear path to equality after 47 h3 d5, but I can't! The drawback of h3 is weakening g3, and that seems to be a relevant factor here: 48 ♘d2 ♗g5! is awkward and Black still has some pressure after 48 ♘c3 ♗f6 49 g4 hxg4+ 50 hxg4 ♘d4+ 51 ♔f2 ♖a5!?. However, the line 48 ♔f4 g6 (48...♘h6 is better, followed by ...g5+, after which Black gains some space) 49 g4 hxg4 50 hxg4 ♗c7+ 51 ♖xc7+ ♔xc7 52 gxf5 dxe4 53 fxg6 exd3 54 ♔e3, with a drawn ending, is noteworthy. It is a

sideline here, but it might be possible to make it the main line by starting with a different first move, i.e. 47 ♔f4! and now 47...g6 is forced and after 48 h3 d5 49 g4 hxg4 50 hxg4 we have, almost by force, the same position. Now if Black plays 50...♗c7+ we get a drawn ending (as above), but if he doesn't, White does not have to retreat his knight to an awkward square and has various ways to play more actively; e.g. 50...♘e7 51 ♘f6+ or 50...♘h6 51 g5!? ♘f5 52 ♘f6+.

47...hxg4+ 48 ♔xg4 g6! *(D)*



Over the last few moves we could say that the position has gone from equal to ... equal! But look at how things have changed! A few moments ago Black seemed to be hanging on with tactical tricks, but a more sober appreciation suggests that Black was never really in danger. Now, however, White has to take some care. I find it hard to explain why White is the one who should be worried here, but it has something to do with that elusive concept of 'coordination'. Consider the relative stability and purpose of the pieces and the pawns. The a6-rook is attacking a3 and coming to a4 and is more purposeful than the rook on c1, which should really be on g1 attacking g6. But then the rook would be blocked by the king on g4, which should really be on e2 protecting d3. And the e4-knight is unsure where it is going, because at any moment it might be prodded by Black's d-pawn. The black knight is secure and particularly excited about landing on e3 at a suitable moment. Meanwhile, the b2-bishop is unprotected and therefore vulnerable in certain lines (as we shall see), while the d8-bishop is looking quite snug in his queen's bed.

At some point over the next few moves, White's position goes from slightly uncomfortable to seriously worse and it's hard to be sure exactly where White went seriously wrong. Although I said that the position should be equal, this assessment is partly computer-inspired, and Black's position is certainly much easier to play.

49 ♘g3?!

The knight lacks prospects here. 49 ♔f3 looks more flexible.

49...♖a4+ 50 ♔f3 ♘h4+

A knight on the rim is dim, unless he can swim, in which case you never know when he might dive in.

51 ♔e2 d5!

Preventing ♖c4 and taking control of e4. It's not clear to White what will come next, but I imagine he was already beginning to feel the pressure here.

52 ♖f1?!

I am not sure that the rook does more 'behind' Black's position than 'in front' of it and I suspect White is beginning to lose control of the game here.

52...♗e7!

With all that excitement on the kingside, it would be easy to forget the weakness on a3.

53 ♖f7?! ♔e6 54 ♖h7

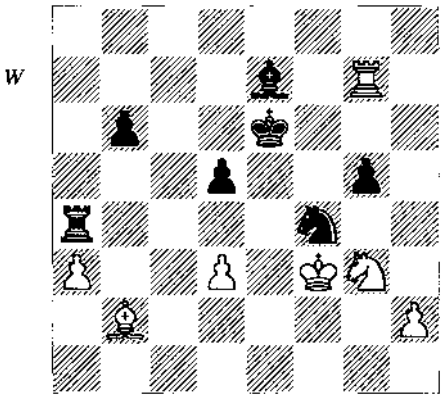
Now that Black is so well coordinated, this looks like pseudo-activity. However, given the progress that Luke has made, it is understandable that White wanted to 'fight back' (note the narrative feel to that – see Chapters 3 and 4).

54...♘g2! 55 ♖g7 ♘f4+ 56 ♔f3 g5! *(D)*

Over the last few moves, White has thrashed around with his rook, while Black has improved all his pieces. In addition to the fact that Luke won this game from such a simple position, I was struck by the way he made full use of his army. Each side has eight units, but somehow Black made optimal use of all eight and made them work together. White might already be past the point of no return.

57 ♖g8

Luke makes the comment in his post-game notes: "I was looking at 57 ♗c1, which is



probably better. But by this stage I felt I was going to win somehow. Indeed, 57...♗f6 58 ♖b7 ♘xd3 59 ♖xb6+ ♔e5! looks winning."

57...♘xd3

In this move we can feel the satisfaction that comes from patience and determination.

58 ♖g6+ ♔d7 59 ♖xb6 ♗c5!

Winning material at last.

60 ♖b5 ♔c6 61 ♖xc5+

61 ♖b8 ♖f4+ 62 ♔e2 ♘xb2 63 ♖xb2 ♖f2+.

61...♔xc5 62 ♗g7 ♖f4+ 63 ♔e3 ♔c4 64 ♘e2 ♖e4+ 65 ♔d2 ♖h4 0-1

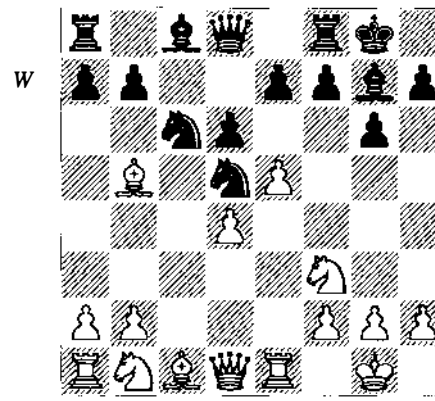
When 'Simple' is Not So Simple...

Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.
EINSTEIN

I find the following game quite mysterious and I think studying it closely will reward the reader considerably. After a certain point Black seems to have only a very slight advantage, but it is extremely difficult for White to prevent this from growing inexorably towards a full point. In this sense I believe the game gives another interesting example of what Mihai Suba means by considering 'potential' to be a major positional consideration (see Chapter 13 for a fuller account). Black's position only looked very slightly better, but it had considerable potential, while White's position appeared only very slightly worse, but he seemed to exhaust his potential very quickly without making any obvious mistakes.

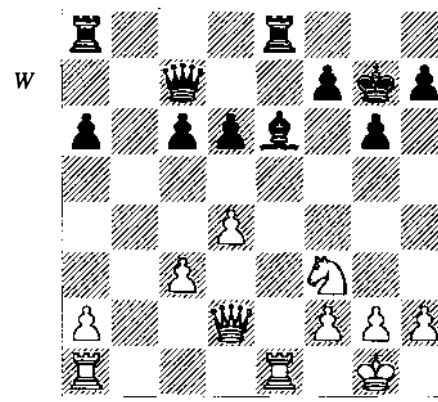
Shaw – McShane
British League (4NCL) 2003/4

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♗b5 g6 4 0-0 ♗g7 5 c3 ♘f6 6 ♖e1 0-0 7 e5 ♘d5 8 d4 cxd4 9 cxd4 d6 *(D)*



This is all still theory, and White heads for a line that gives him a superficial initiative.

10 ♘c3 ♘xc3 11 bxc3 a6 12 ♗xc6 bxc6 13 exd6 exd6 14 ♗g5 ♕c7 15 ♕d2 ♗e6 16 ♗h6 ♖fe8 17 ♗xg7 ♔xg7 *(D)*



White could perhaps have caused more problems than he has, but none of his moves are obviously bad. Even so, somehow Black already has the more comfortable position.

18 ♘g5

Another reasonable move, but 18 h3!?, intending to play ♘h2 and perhaps ♘g4 or ♘f1-e3 depending on what the position requires, is probably better.

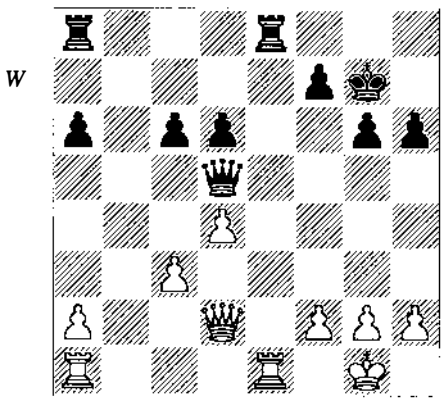
18...♗d5 19 ♘h3 ♕a5

The a2-pawn already feels watched!

20 ♘f4 h6!

A useful move, covering the g5-square and so ruling out any ♘h5+ tricks.

21 ♘xd5 ♕xd5 *(D)*



White has not played with enormous energy, but none of his moves looked particularly bad, and it seems like a draw is quite likely here. However, Black has two main advantages: a slightly more active king and a significantly more active queen. This activity makes it difficult for White to exchange rooks and therefore hard to release the tension. This is a key point to bear in mind when trying to evaluate simple positions: can further simplification be forced? If not, perhaps the position is not so 'simple' after all. Moreover, **positional tension tends to favour the side that can release it more readily**, and so here the tension clearly favours Black.

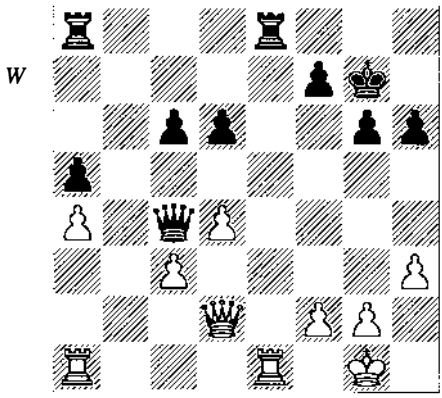
22 h3

It is understandable that John wanted to solve his back-rank problems, but 22 ♖e2! looks like the most constructive move, trying to force exchanges without losing shape. After 22...a5 23 ♖ae1 ♖xe2 24 ♕xe2 a4 25 ♖d1 intending c4 I think White should be OK.

22...a5!

Quietly gaining space. Luke intends to push the pawn up to a3, which would improve his position and give him an entry point for his rook on b2. White cannot just wait for Black to strengthen his position without improving his own, and so John decides not to let Black gain any ground.

23 a4 ♕c4! *(D)*



But now the queen is very strongly placed here, targeting a4 and c3 and controlling e2. I have noticed in many simple positions that having one very active piece that cannot easily be exchanged often constitutes a significant advantage.

24 ♕c2

Now note the relationship of the queen on c4 and the queen on c2. White's queen is tied to the defence of a4 and c3 and so can hardly move from a very unsatisfactory post, while Black's queen has no particular desire to move, because it is already excellently placed!

White cannot afford to lose control of the e-file, as he did in the game, so 24 ♖e3 comes to mind. However, after 24...♖ab8 25 ♕e1! ♖xe3 26 ♕xe3 ♖b2 there is still some pressure.

24...♖ab8

The first threats start to emerge; taking on e1 and ...♖b3 is the main one.

25 ♖xe8 ♖xe8 26 ♖b1 ♖e2 27 ♕b3 ♕d3

The relative activity of the pieces is suddenly very stark and Black is now winning. White tries to rock the boat, but it's not enough.

28 d5

28 ♖f1 d5, intending ...♖c2, is also winning for Black.

28...cxd5 29 ♕b5 ♕d2! 30 ♖f1 ♖e1! 31 g3 ♖xf1+ 32 ♔xf1 ♕xc3 33 ♕xd5 ♕a1+ 34 ♔g2 ♕xa4 35 ♕xd6 ♕e4+ 36 ♔h2 a4 37 h4 h5 38 f3 ♕e2+ 39 ♔g1 ♕b2 0-1

Intrinsic Motivation

What struck me most about those last three games was how much satisfaction they gave to the victor, and not so much after the games but during them. They all seemed to involve a state of mind where Luke was enjoying playing so much that he almost forgot he was playing for a win. This relates to what I was suggesting in Chapter 5 about the pleasure of concentration, and the more precise expression in the given context is 'intrinsic motivation' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Intrinsic motivation amounts to the love of doing something for the sake of it, rather than the outcome it leads to, which would be extrinsic motivation. Both forms of motivation are evident in chess, and the role of intrinsic motivation is very easily misunderstood because it does not mean that winning doesn't matter. Many people want to say something like: "it's not the winning, but the taking part that counts", but it never really rings true because it is clear that the result is what drives us.

This challenge of managing the tension between the process of playing and the result of the game is one of the main things that makes chess such an excellent vehicle for personal growth. **Winning does matter, but it is part of the game rather than the ultimate end of it. The end is the game itself and the wonderful experiences it provides, while the result creates the context that gives rise to those experiences.**

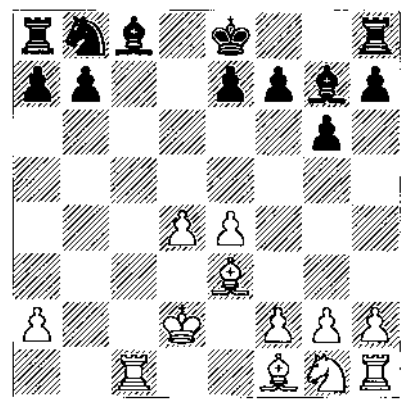
So in the context of grinding, your capacity to grind out wins in the way that Luke did above depends upon a certain attitude. You need to be happy to be playing chess, and since the aim of the game is to win, when it happens it is a welcome bonus. These thoughts about winning and playing were uppermost in my mind at a certain point in the following game (notes based on annotations for *British Chess Magazine*), which hopefully shows that my 'technique' has improved somewhat compared to the game given at the start of this chapter. I think it was only possible to win in the way I did from considering Luke's games so closely, and in particular reflecting on the satisfaction they wrought.

Crouch – Rowson
Oxford Weekender 2004

It was a warm Sunday afternoon in the beautiful city of Oxford. I was looking forward to finishing this game and getting out in the sunshine to meet up with some old friends. However, Colin and I were the only two players on 3½/4 and it seemed likely that two other players would make 4/5 so from a financial point of view (extrinsic motivation!) there was quite a big difference between a win a draw. However, a loss would be disastrous, so I began by trying to play for 'two results' and stay on the right side of the draw until a moment where I felt it was safe to push for a win.

1 d4 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 cxd5 ♘xd5 5 e4 ♘xc3 6 bxc3 ♗g7 7 ♗e3 c5 8 ♖c1 ♕a5 9 ♕d2 cxd4 10 cxd4 ♕xd2+ 11 ♔xd2 *(D)*

B



The current wisdom on this line is that if White has to recapture on d2 with his king then Black is fine. For this reason, 8 ♘f3 is considered more dangerous, to give White the opportunity to recapture on d2 with the knight.

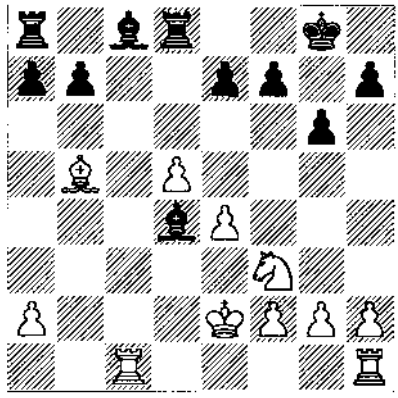
11...0-0 12 ♗b5 ♖d8 13 ♔e2?!

This surprised me and I wondered if Colin was following something that I should have known about. However, it turns out that it was just his own idea that he had prepared at home.

13 ♘f3 ♗d7 14 ♗xd7 ♘xd7 15 ♖c7 ♘e5 is an equalizing line, given in my book *Understanding the Grünfeld*. 13 ♘e2 is also possible.

13...♘c6 14 d5 ♘d4+ 15 ♗xd4 ♗xd4 16 ♘f3 *(D)*

B



I felt a little deflated here, because it seemed like I would have to play ...♗g4 followed by taking on f3 and we would get an opposite-bishop position, and no doubt a draw soon after. Moreover, at this stage of the game, a brass band started to play outside in the college grounds (we were playing in an Oxford University college) and it was so intrusive that most players couldn't conceal their mirth. This factor, in addition to the general desire to get outside, made it all the more tempting to end the game. However, I was beginning to sense that even in the opposite-bishop endings it would be more comfortable to be Black, so I resolved to play until move 20 and reassess the situation.

16...♗g4!

The correct move, even in the circumstances. 16...♗b6 would keep the game more unbalanced, and would be more consistent with the 'playing for a win' story. However, I have found that you are very rarely rewarded for playing a move that you know to be inferior. After 16...♗b6?!, 17 ♖hd1 leaves White with a commanding central position.

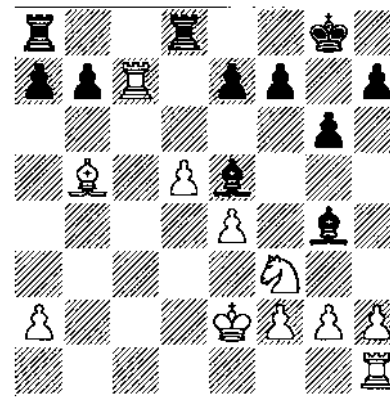
17 ♖c7

Colin played this ambitious move very quickly. It is certainly tempting to place a rook on the seventh and attack two pawns, but it felt wrong to me and I wasn't afraid of allowing it. I'm not sure why it didn't scare me, but it's something to do with White's lack of dark-square control. After the less exciting 17 h3 ♗xf3+ 18 ♔xf3 ♖ac8 the position is equal, but somehow Black is 'more equal' in the sense that my bishop is slightly better and my queenside majority might one day be relevant; e.g., 19 ♔e2 ♗b2 20 ♖xc8 ♖xc8 21 ♖b1 ♖c2+ 22 ♔d1 ♖xf2 23 ♗e2 ♗d4 24 ♖xb7 ♔f8 and I prefer Black. Note that the willingness to allow this line already involves some aspect of intrinsic motivation because it commits me to playing a position that I know should really be drawn, but this didn't discourage me, because I felt comfortable about playing such a position and didn't associate it directly with the likely result.

17...♗e5! *(D)*

I hadn't seen this in advance, but I wasn't surprised to find it because I was sure that I had done nothing wrong. 17...e6 18 ♗d7! is an annoying surprise. 17...♗b6 is a similar idea, but doesn't quite work: 18 ♖xb7 ♗c8 19 ♖xe7 ♔f8 20 d6 ♖xd6 21 ♖e8+.

W



18 ♖c2

This was the result of Colin's first big think of the game. The white rook must sheepishly retreat or else be eaten by lesser forces. Other moves:

a) 18 ♖xe7 ♗d6 19 ♖xb7 ♗c8! 20 ♗c6 ♗xb7 21 ♗xb7 ♖ab8 22 ♗c6 (22 ♖b1 ♖d7 23 ♗c6 ♖xb1 24 ♗xd7 ♖b2+) 22...♖b2+.

b) 18 ♖xb7 ♗c8 19 ♖xe7 ♗d6 20 ♖e8+ ♖xe8 21 ♗xe8 ♗a6+!. This is the sort of sweet

detail that keeps me playing chess. It's extremely satisfying to see such a move in advance and know that it vindicates your judgement of the position.

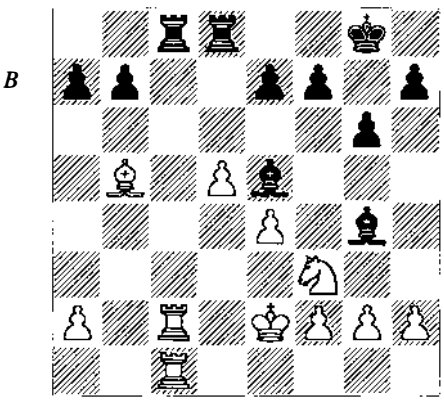
Now I also had a long think because there are various ways to try to gain the advantage, but in all cases the advantage is very slight.

18...♖ac8!

Around here I was still toying with the idea of going out to enjoy the sunshine, but it occurred to me that Luke would win this game as Black so I set about thinking how he might do it. I have a choice between an ending of two bishops against bishop and knight without rooks or an opposite bishop ending with some extra space and scope.

In the transformation that is about to occur, it's important to exchange a pair of rooks. This allows my king to become active in relative safety and also means that I don't have any dead wood on a8. Compared with the game, 18...f5 19 h3 ♗xf3+ 20 ♔xf3 f4 21 ♖hc1 is a different story entirely because with two rooks White can conjure up all sorts of trouble.

19 ♖hc1 *(D)*



19...♖xc2+

19...♗b2!? 20 ♖xc8 ♖xc8 21 ♖xc8+ ♗xc8 looks like a tangible edge for Black in that I have a potential passed pawn and two bishops. However, this is a kind of 'storytelling' in that it would be using the desired result (the outcome) to colour the assessment of the position that is supposed to lead to that outcome. This is an example of how objectivity can break down. You end up over-emphasizing your assets and ignoring those of your opponent. However, when you are just 'playing' rather than 'playing for a win' you are less likely to make this sort of mistake. In this case I noticed that White's control of the centre is the most significant factor and that this makes it difficult to activate my king; e.g., 22 ♔d3 ♔f8 23 ♘d4 is fine for White, who intends f4 and e5.

20 ♖xc2 f5!

A key detail. I am seeking an opposite bishop ending with a secure hold of the dark squares.

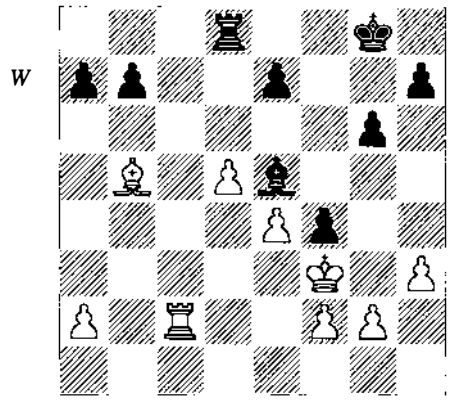
21 h3

After 21 exf5 ♗xf5! the bishops are really alive so Black has a clear advantage.

21...♗xf3+

21...fxe4 22 hxg4 exf3+ 23 ♔xf3 is a favourable version of the game for White, because he is much less cramped.

22 ♔xf3 f4! *(D)*

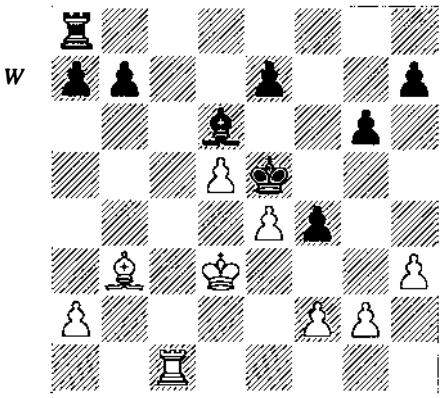


This position is ideal for the circumstances because Black has very few losing chances and plenty of opportunities to try to improve his position. Gaining some space with my f-pawn has made a significant difference to the position. The small advantage now consists in having the more secure and influential bishop and a more significant pawn-majority. The position should be drawn of course, but the advantage is enduring, so White will have to defend accurately for a long time and there is nothing to stop me 'playing' for the foreseeable future.

23 ♗a4 ♔f7 24 ♗b3 ♔f6 25 ♔e2 ♗d6

Originally I intended to play ...♖d6-b6 in order to cause some trouble with my rook in conjunction with my queenside pawns. However, I felt it was more important to keep White's rook out of my position. 25...♖d6 26 ♖c8 ♖b6 27 ♖f8+ ♔g7 28 ♖e8 is annoying because 28...♔f7 29 ♖a8 threatening d6+ is a problem.

26 ♔d3 ♔e5 27 ♖c1 ♖a8!? *(D)*



This is a somewhat pretentious move, but that doesn't make it bad. I want to play ...b5 and ...a5 and then threaten ...a4 and ...b4. This is only possible with the rook on a8.

28 ♗a4 ♖b8 29 ♗d7 b5 30 ♖c8?!

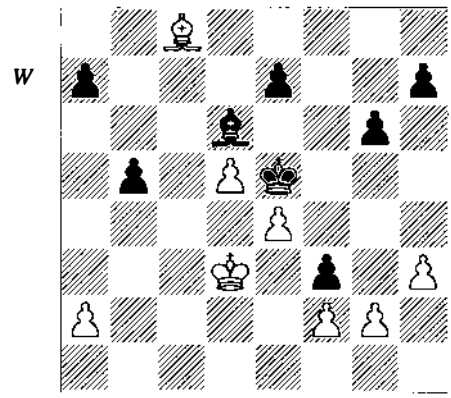
This move leads to some surprising difficulties so there was something to be said for securing the kingside before playing it: 30 f3 b4 31 ♗a4 (31 ♖c8? b3! gives Black a lot of play) 31...g5 32 ♖c6 h5 33 ♗d1!. It doesn't take long to realize that White has everything covered here. The game is not dead, but Black will find it hard to play for a win without taking serious risks.

30...♖xc8

This is not forced, but in such a fast time-control you sometimes need to get on with things and I didn't want to miss the following opportunity, or to let my opponent think about it in my time. 30...♖b7 is also possible, but I doubt I will get a better opportunity to cause trouble than the one I chose.

31 ♗xc8 f3! *(D)*

I hesitated before playing this because I suddenly noticed the possibility of 32 ♔e3 and with it, the appearance of 'the third result'.



32 gxf3?!

Fortunately, Colin missed the possibility of 32 ♔e3!?. Then:

a) 32...♗c5+ 33 ♔xf3 ♔d4 is probably enough for a draw. This was an important thing to see – knowing that I was not forced to sacrifice a piece made me feel more comfortable about playing 31...f3.

b) 32...fxg2 33 f4+ ♔f6 34 e5+ ♗xe5 (the alternative 34...♔g7 35 ♔f2 ♗c7 36 ♔xg2 g5 37 ♔f3 gxf4 38 ♔xf4 b4 should be enough for a draw) 35 fxe5+ ♔xe5 36 ♔f2 ♔xd5. I wasn't too sure how to assess this position, but I thought that a black loss was the least likely of the three possible results.

After the text-move, I think the position is probably drawn, but both sides have to be careful.

32...♔f4 33 ♗d7

33 ♔e2 a5 34 ♗d7 b4 35 ♗a4 ♗c5 36 ♗e8 ♔e5 37 ♗b5 ♔d4 38 ♔d2!. I think we both missed this possibility at the time, although I certainly felt White should have a draw here somehow. 38...♗d6 39 ♔c2 ♗h2 40 ♔b3 should give White enough counterplay to draw.

33...b4 34 ♗a4 ♔xf3 35 ♔d4 ♔f4!

The exclam is for practicality; the time-control was move 36.

36 ♗c2 a5 37 ♔c4 ♔f3 38 ♔d4?

A natural move and the one that I expected. The possibility of playing e5 proved too positionally desirable to resist. However, White now crosses the drawing threshold and I believe there is no way back. 38 ♔b5! is better. After 38...♔xf2 39 ♔xa5 ♔g3 40 e5! ♗xe5 41 ♔xb4

♔xh3 42 ♔c5! White draws quite comfortably because it is so difficult for Black to advance the g- and h-pawns but very easy for White to advance the a-pawn.

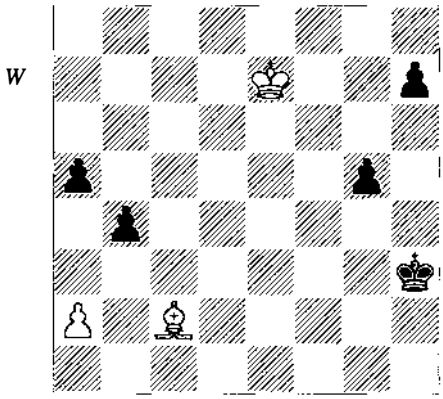
38...♔xf2 39 e5 ♗c7 40 d6 exd6 41 e6 ♗d8 42 ♔d5 ♔g3

42...♗e7!? 43 ♔c6 ♗f8 44 ♔d7 d5 also looks winning for Black but is needlessly complicated.

43 ♔xd6 ♔xh3 44 e7

44 ♔d7!? ♗f6 45 ♔e8 was worth a try, with the tricky notion that 45...g5? 46 ♔f7 causes trouble. However, even then Black still wins after 46...♗d8 47 ♔e8 ♗b6! 48 e7 ♗c5 49 ♗xh7 g4, etc.

44...♗xe7+ 45 ♔xe7 g5! *(D)*



A key move, which it was important to see in advance. When you are trying to work out whether a bishop can hold up passed pawns, the key idea is the 'one-diagonal principle'; i.e., can the bishop stay on the same diagonal and stop the pawns? If not, the chances are much higher that the pawns will triumph because the bishop will be pulled in two different directions. In this case, the white bishop is the only piece conceivably capable of stopping my pawns, but my queenside pawns are so far advanced that White's bishop is quickly overstretched.

46 ♔f6

46 ♗xh7 g4 47 ♗f5 a4 48 ♗e6 ♔h4 wins for Black.

46...g4 47 ♗f5 ♔h4! 0-1

All White can do is decide which of Black's pawns should be allowed to become a queen.

Conclusions:

1) Grinding has an image problem, but being a good grinder is an important part of competitive success, especially with Black.

2) Simple positions can be won, especially when the opponent cannot force further simplification.

3) Good grinding requires 'staying power', 'gumption' and intrinsic motivation.

Part 3: Thinking Colourfully about Black and White

The title, *Chess for Zebras*, resonates most directly with this final part of the book. Chess-players, like zebras, not only have a black nature and a white nature, but a black-and-white nature. We tend to begin the game with different expectations depending on whether we are playing with Black or White and this part of the book aims to get underneath those expectations and see what they are based on.

I begin in Chapter 11 by considering the relationship between theory and practice, before moving on to try to separate 'White's advantage' from 'Black's advantage' in Chapters 12 and 13 respectively. Much of the discussion is of a philosophical nature, but I have used several illustrative examples and tried to make some inferences about what the discussions might mean in practice.

You may note that I refer to White and Black as 'colours' in the discussion that follows. I am aware that White and Black are not colours, because White contains them all while Black wants nothing to do with them. However, I decided to refer to them as colours and to make the discussion about Black and White as colourful as possible. After all, the idea of a colourless zebra does violence to language, and, of course, to zebras.

11 Three Types of Theory and What They Mean in Practice

When French and British bureaucrats met to discuss the building of the Channel Tunnel, a curious thing occurred. The discussions were going well and all the practical details were agreed upon, but then one of the leading French bureaucrats began to look troubled and posed a question that would hold up the project for a while. "I see how it all works in practice," he said, "but how does it work in theory?"

We are used to that question being inverted. In chess, as in many spheres of life, we tend to concern ourselves with putting theory into practice, on the assumption that this is a sensible and judicious thing to do. However, sometimes practice makes a mockery of theory, like bumble bees flying in the air while theories of aerodynamics said this was impossible. But what do we mean by 'theory' anyway? And how exactly does it relate to practice? 'Theory' tells us many things, but the main thing that practice tells us is that our games are riddled with errors. It's not just that 'we all make mistakes' but that most of us make lots and lots of them, again and again and again.

The genesis of this book was reflecting on that fact, and the associated thought that if most chess games are riddled with errors, it shouldn't really matter whether you move first. Indeed, if you are prone to error, on the face of it moving first just makes it more likely that you will be the first to err! And yet there must be more to it than that, for the statistics consistently show that White scores around 56%, almost regardless of the strength of the players or the decade under consideration.

It has never been obvious to me that White begins the game with a meaningful advantage, but I realized that arguing with the statistics was not going to get me very far. Even though I understand that statistical analysis is quite malleable, and it might be possible to show that the statistics on the first-move advantage are somehow misleading or insignificant, this wouldn't change the fact that on most statistical measures, White's higher score is still theoretically at large, and influences our view of the game and our expectations for results to follow the statistical pattern in the long term. A more fruitful approach, it seemed to me, was a careful consideration of the differences between playing Black and White in practice, and an examination of the relationship between those practical differences, and the 'theory' that is supposed to describe them.

Will Ceteris find Paribus on the Chessboard?

'Ceteris Paribus' – other things being equal (Latin)
OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

Conventional wisdom is often more conventional than wise, but in the absence of alternatives, following convention often seems the wisest thing to do. For this reason most players don't question the claim that White begins the game with some advantage, and seem to accept it as an important feature of the game. The conventional wisdom that White is better is based on the finality of chess results. Results generate statistics, and these statistics penetrate our theories of the game. With regard to the first move in chess, the conventional wisdom is that White begins the game with a small advantage and, holding all other factors constant, scores approximately 56% to Black's 44%. The statistics

thus seem to create and corroborate the conventional wisdom.

However. (Most 'howevers' are followed by a comma, but this one deserves a full stop and a separate paragraph. He is a pugnacious 'however', gate-crashing the statistical tea party above in a purple suit, carrying a cup of coffee.)

You may not even have noticed the 'holding all other factors constant' above. This is the so-called 'ceteris paribus' clause, beloved by statisticians, economists and other well-meaning creatures. Ceteris (all other things) paribus (being equal) is an essential analytical tool, needed to make theoretical conclusions. You need ceteris to be paribus in order to isolate certain factors so that you can analyse them without lots of associated factors complicating the results. In this case it is the relationship between the first move and the result of the game, but it could equally be the relationship between supply and demand. For instance, ceteris paribus, an increase in the demand for Jaffa Cakes will result in an increase in the supply of Jaffa Cakes. That makes sense, and if you find that there was a case where an increase in the demand for Jaffa Cakes was not met with an increase in supply, it's not a problem for the argument because ceteris probably wasn't paribus (e.g. the production of Jaffa Cakes was on hold over a legal dispute concerning their status as 'cakes' as opposed to 'biscuits' – I use this example because it actually happened!).

Such factors are often minor irritations, but there are some cases where Ceteris's seemingly culpable refusal to be Paribus suggests that you are asking the wrong question, and that what you are trying to hold constant is in fact the very thing that you should have been examining in the first place. Many players score persistently well with Black, many tournaments present anomalies whereby Black wins more games than White, and in our most recent World Championship match (Leko vs Kramnik) Black did not seem to fare worse, in terms of results or positions out of the opening. So what do we really mean when we say: "'ceteris paribus', White scores around 56% in chess"?

If we are being charitable, we might say that we don't really mean anything at all, in the sense that you cannot translate a theoretical claim into a practical scenario without violating the nature of the argument. But this doesn't seem very satisfying. Perhaps we mean that if you were to play your identical twin, who has exactly the same chess skill and experience as you, with the same energy levels in the same room at the same time of the day, on the same day of the week, etc., etc., etc., about one thousand times, then you would find that White would score around 56%.

A more realistic interpretation is that if two players of approximately the same strength, who are both in moderate form, who have both slept well, neither of whom is hungry or thirsty, neither of whom had an argument with their girlfriend before the game, neither of whom is a 'bogey player' or 'nemesis' of the other, neither of whom has a string of decisive novelties up his sleeve, neither of whom is going to get distracted by something going on in the room, neither of whom is prone to randomizing events in chronic time-trouble, etc., etc., etc., then measured over the course of several games, White has a 56% chance compared to Black's 44%.

Which means the game is most likely to be drawn. I fear I could further labour this point, so I'll cut to the chase and say that while I have nothing against Ceteris or Paribus, I have yet to see them together. Theoretically they may be inextricably linked, but in reality they were separated at birth. They might occasionally bump into one another unwittingly at an economics conference, but they have yet to get it together on the chessboard.

That thought is merely a small dent on White's alleged advantage, and the statistics remain convincing in their own way. However, statistics are impersonal aggregated numbers, while, as we all know, chess is played by real people on particular days, in certain contexts. The fact that White scores better statistically is noteworthy because it reflects the outcome of those real games, but even more noteworthy, to my mind, is that 'the underdog' frequently defies expectations.

What does this mean for you? It means, I think, that you are better off taking one game at a time. Approach each game as a unique

opportunity to excel. Don't tie yourself down with thoughts about colour and rating that are meaningful in large numbers, but almost irrelevant from game to game.

In the following game I was up against a famous grandmaster who outrated me by about two hundred points, and I was Black. From a statistical point of view, it was not looking good. Moreover, I had not slept well the night before, because I was locked out of my hotel and had to crash on a friend's floor at the venue. The next morning I somehow managed to finagle some breakfast before the game, and came to the board feeling strangely happy. You need more than one game to challenge statistics that are based on millions of games, but nonetheless chess is played one game at a time. We are more likely to do well if we focus on the subjective experience of the challenge in front of us, rather than the statistical likelihood of the result going a certain way.

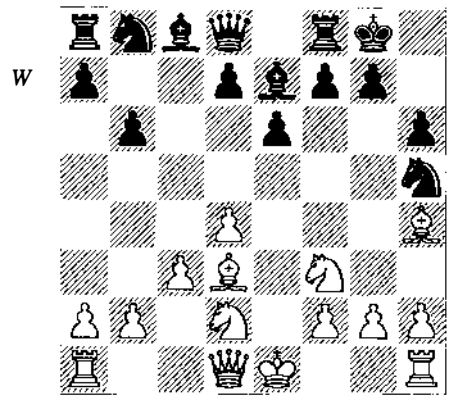
Miles – Rowson

British League (4NCL) 1996/7

1 d4 ♘f6 2 ♗g5 e6 3 ♘d2 h6 4 ♗h4 c5 5 e3 cxd4 6 exd4 ♗e7

I remember asking Tony if he felt that this opening gave White chances for an advantage. He replied that **the point was not to get an advantage but to get an unbalanced position that he was comfortable with and then to outplay me at some point between move 25 and 40**. As I argue in the next chapter, being able to dictate the pace and type of position is one of the advantages of being White in chess.

7 c3 b6 8 ♗d3 0-0 9 ♘gf3 ♘h5 *(D)*



A standard manoeuvre aiming to exchange one minor piece and give Black more space for his pieces. I was fairly sure I wanted to play this, but not yet sure if I wanted to play ...♗b7 or ...♗a6.

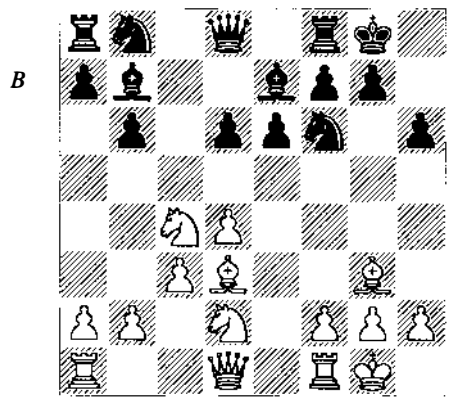
10 ♗g3!

Without hesitation. Taking on e7 is less dangerous for Black because the two remaining knights have things to look forward to in a way that Black's dark-squared bishop doesn't. The f4-square is also weakened, and Black can sometimes safely play ...f5 with a view to attacking on the kingside.

10...♗b7 11 ♘e5 ♘f6!

This move is an admission that things have gone a little wrong, but it's still probably the best continuation. I barely considered 11...♘xg3 12 hxg3 ♗xg2. There is no immediate kill, but after 13 ♖h2 ♗d5 14 ♕e2 White will castle queenside and start thinking nasty thoughts about my king.

12 0-0 d6 13 ♘ec4 *(D)*



13...♘c6

In some ways this is not ideal: the knight tends to be better on d7 in these types of positions. On the other hand, White takes a long time to move his f3-knight to e3. It is better placed there, because it doesn't block the f-pawn or the queen's access to the kingside, but it's not clear if it was worth the time taken.

14 ♘e3 ♖e8

Anticipating f4-f5 and thinking of the c6-knight, which will have a square on e7 after ...♗f8.

15 ♕e2 g6 16 ♖ad1

After the game Tony said ruefully. "I always put my rook on d1 in these positions and it never seems to do anything!" 16 h3!? ensures the survival of the g3-bishop and introduces the idea of ♘g4. In that case I think White has some advantage.

16...♘h5

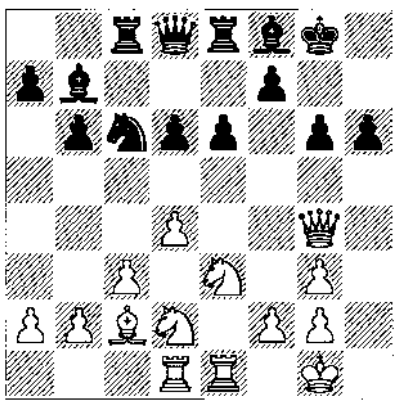
Black again. Now that White has castled kingside, and I am better developed, I can again think about taking his g3-bishop.

17 ♖fe1 ♗f8 18 ♗c2 ♖c8

Generally quite useful, but my opponent was playing very quickly, and it's important not to fall too far behind on the clock without good reason. In this case I have lots of decent moves, and the key is just to play them, and not worry, at this stage, about getting them in the right order. Any problem resulting from getting the order wrong is likely to be less significant than a serious time-shortage later in the game.

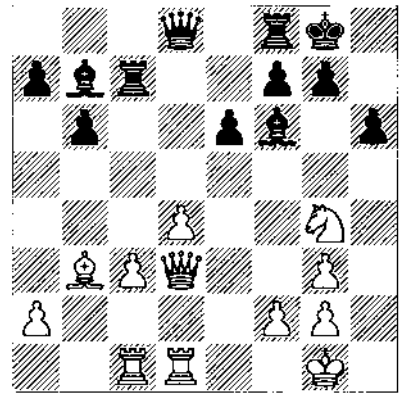
19 ♕g4 ♘xg3 20 hxg3 *(D)*

B



And here I had a funny feeling of déjà vu, and felt sure that I had seen a position like this, or very much like this, before. I couldn't remember it explicitly at the time, but I played the following few moves confidently, and in doing so I remembered that the patterns were familiar to me from an example I had considered in Dvoretsky and Yusupov's *Opening Preparation* (please forgive the tangent, but the similarity is sufficiently striking that it is worth showing that example here):

B



Gavrikov – Yusupov
Interzonal, Tunis 1985

On the face of it, the position is very different, but the pattern of play that takes place over the next few moves made a big impression on me and I think it helped me to organize my position against Miles.

21...h5! 22 ♘e3? ♖d7! 23 g4 hxg4 24 ♘xg4 g6! 25 ♖e1?

25 ♕e3! – Dvoretsky (to prevent ...♔g7 and ...♖h8).

25...♔g7! 26 ♖cd1?! ♖h8 27 ♕g3 ♖h5! 28 ♕f4? ♗e7! 29 ♕c1 ♗d6 30 ♘e5 ♕h4 31 f3 ♕g3 32 ♖e3 ♖d8 0-1

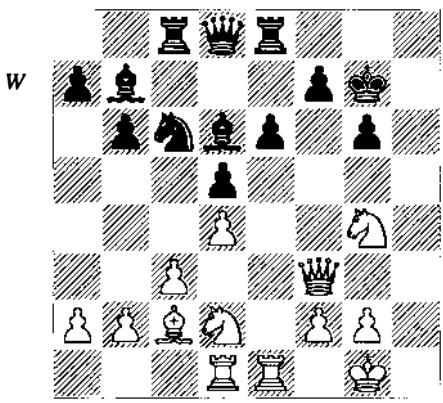
Returning to our main game, we see that the structure is very different, but the situation on the kingside is very similar and the purpose of the moves ...♔g7, ...♗d6 and ...♖h5 was almost identical. As I mentioned in *7DCS*, "This is how pattern-recognition works: the pattern is absorbed and becomes familiar, and then the main theme of the pattern can be seen in an unfamiliar position." But note that what is 'recognized' is not a snapshot of the position, but the main concept, and I think the concept is recognized because it takes a narrative form. What I was reminded of was the 'story' of the king on g8 who was under attack in a context where the defender had an unopposed dark-squared bishop and the attacker had doubled g-pawns: ...h5

nudged away an attacker, White opened the h-file with g4, but then the bishop was re-routed to d6, the king stood proud on g7 and the rook came to h8. And at that point, the hunter became the hunted.

20...h5! 21 ♕f4 d5! 22 g4

22 ♘f3 ♗d6 23 ♘e5 ♕c7 24 ♘f1 is also possible, with a finely balanced position.

22...♗d6 23 ♕f3 hxg4 24 ♘xg4 ♔g7! *(D)*



See the similarity? Now Black's dark-square control is a significant feature of the position, my king is relatively safe and when the rook comes to h8, it is White who will need to think carefully about his king.

25 ♗a4 ♖h8 26 g3 a6 27 ♕e3 ♖h5!

Extra control of e5 and opening up possibilities of doubling on the h-file, just like the Yusupov game.

28 ♘f3 b5 29 ♗b3

29 ♗c2 b4.

29...♘a5!

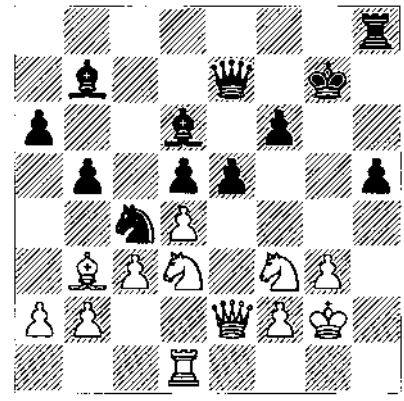
Not so much intending to take the bishop, but hoping to come to c4 at a moment when White is least prepared for it.

30 ♔g2 ♕e7 31 ♖h1 ♖ch8 32 ♖xh5 gxh5!?

Taking with the rook is certainly safer and leaves Black with a slight edge, due to the bishop-pair and marginally better structure (extra centre pawn) but this combative move, although risky, was vindicated by the way the game developed.

33 ♘ge5 ♘c4 34 ♕e2 f6 35 ♘d3 e5 *(D)*

My last few moves make a coherent impression, but the gain in space and central control



has come at the cost of safety. I remember feeling confident here, but also a little nervous about the vulnerable squares around my king.

36 ♘h4 ♗c8 37 dxe5

37 ♘b4 ♗xb4 38 cxb4 e4 is hard to judge, but I think Black is at least OK because my c8-bishop, although it seems 'bad', will always have important work to do on the h5-d1 diagonal. After 39 ♗xc4 bxc4 40 ♕d2 ♗g4 41 ♖e1 ♖b8 42 a3 ♕d7 43 ♔h2 the position is tense.

37...fxe5 38 ♘e1

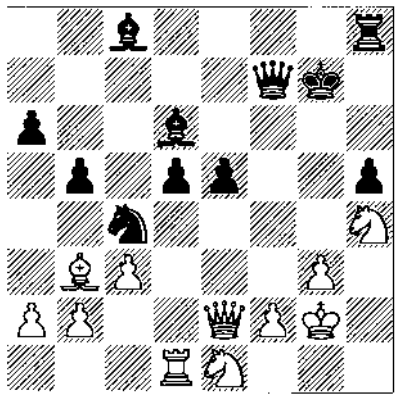
38 ♘b4!?, getting rid of a bishop for some structural cost, is more combative. In that case a plausible continuation might be 38...♗xb4 39 cxb4 ♕f6 40 ♖xd5!? (not forced, but a move that would scare me) 40...♗b7 41 ♗xc4 bxc4 42 ♕e4 ♖d8 43 ♘f5+ (on seeing this manoeuvre, ♘f5-e3, I think I would instinctively avoid this line as Black; however, this is a weakness of mine – sometimes you need the courage to see a little deeper) 43...♔f7 44 ♘e3. Now I know I might win some material, but the position is randomized and on seeing this position from afar, I would probably feel scared. However, Fritz points out the 'simple' 44...♗a8!, putting the bishop on a protected square and preparing ...♔e6. White seems to have no defence. 45 ♔g1 (45 ♖d7+ ♔e8!) 45...♔e6! and Black wins.

38...♕f7 *(D)*

39 ♗c2?

Forcing me to play a move that improves my position.

39 ♘ef3! is correct, but to play this White has to be willing to think anti-positionally and



be redeemed by an unlikely tactic. 39...♗g4 (39...♖f8 looks like an improvement but then 40 ♕c2! introduces the idea of ♖xd5 and this cannot comfortably be prevented) 40 ♗xc4! bxc4 41 ♕d2! with the well-hidden detail 41...e4 42 ♕g5+ ♔h7 43 ♕xg4!. Chess is cruel in that way – the devil is often in the detail. To see this idea when short of time on move 39 is asking a lot, even of a player of Miles's class. Yet without seeing this detail, it is difficult to justify playing 39 ♘ef3, even though it's a necessary move.

39...e4!

The game is strategically decided. All my minor pieces are strongly placed while the c2-bishop and e1-knight are severely restricted.

40 ♖c1

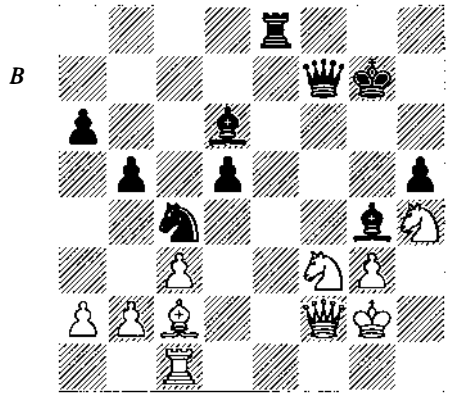
This looks odd, but I was threatening ...♘xb2 with tempo on the rook, and moving to b1 invites a future ...♘d2.

40...♗g4?

This is a natural fortieth move, but 40...♖f8! is better because it introduces the ideas of ...♗xg3 and ...♗c5, in addition to the idea of ...♕e6/d7-h3+. In that case, White has no defence: after 41 f3 ♕e6! 42 ♔h1 ♕h3+ 43 ♕h2 ♗xg3 Black is winning. This is quite an instructive detail and I think it illustrates the value of a concrete approach as opposed to a visual, or superficial one. In this case White needs to play f3 to bring his c2-bishop and e1-knight back to life. I can prevent this with 40...♖f8, but I actually force it with 40...♗g4!

Yet to be fair to myself, I think most GMs would play 40...♗g4 if short of time, because it has a very satisfying feel to it – the bishop attacks the queen from a secure space and after White plays f3, the squares g3 and e3 seem to be fatally weakened.

41 f3 exf3+ 42 ♘exf3 ♖e8 43 ♕f2 *(D)*



43...♘e3+?!

This move seems correct, but I could probably have been more precise here: 43...♘xb2 44 ♗g6 ♗xf3+ 45 ♕xf3 (45 ♔g1 ♕f8 46 ♗xe8 ♗c5! 47 ♘f5+ ♔h8 48 ♘d4 ♘d3) 45...♕xf3+ 46 ♔xf3 ♖f8+ with a winning endgame.

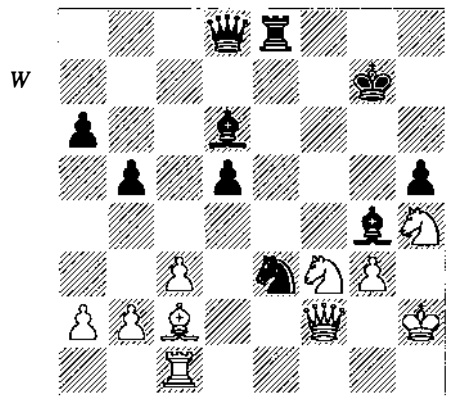
44 ♔g1

Black has complete domination, but it is surprisingly difficult to land the final blow.

44...♕c7 45 ♔h2?

45 ♘d4! gave White better practical chances. 45...♗xg3 46 ♘hf5+ ♗xf5 47 ♘xf5+ ♘xf5 48 ♕xf5 ♕f4 49 ♖f1 ♕xf5 50 ♖xf5 h4 and Black is better, but White has good drawing chances.

45...♕d8 *(D)*



46 ♘g2?

46 ♔g1! would force me to find a different idea. I would probably have tried 46...♕c7 47 ♔h2 ♗c8 intending ...♘g4+, but after 48 ♔h1 it is still hard work; e.g., 48...♕d7 49 ♗g6 ♖e7 50 ♗xh5 and there is no knockout.

46...♖f8! 47 ♕xe3

47 ♘xe3 ♖xf3 48 ♘f5+ ♔f8 49 ♕xf3 ♗xf3 50 ♖f1 would have been more scary, but fortunately Black has 50...♗xg3+ 51 ♔xg3 ♗e4 and will emerge safely with a winning position.

47...♖xf3 48 ♕a7+ ♕c7 49 ♕xc7+ ♗xc7

The ending is completely winning because White cannot coordinate his pieces in time to put up any resistance.

50 ♔g1 ♖xg3 51 ♗d1 ♗f5 52 ♔f2 ♗e4 53 ♘e1 h4 54 ♗f3 ♗b6+ 55 ♔e2 h3 56 ♖d1 h2 0-1

Looking back on this game, almost a decade later, I still feel proud of it. I think there was something about the unusual events of the previous night that made me especially concentrated that day. I felt very little tension at the board, and was very happy to be playing such a strong player. The fact that I was playing Black didn't bother me, and I wasn't afraid of anything in particular in the opening, but when he played a relatively innocuous opening I relaxed completely. However, while this example reminds us of the gap between statistical expectations and the possibilities of real games, it doesn't really prove anything about the advantage of the first move. It did, however, make me feel that playing Black need not be considered a handicap, even against a world-class grandmaster, and that feeling has stayed with me ever since.

On balance, I still prefer playing White in most games, but for me the question of whether you have the first move is just one of numerous factors on any given day, and some of those factors might make it preferable to be Black. For instance if I am sure my opponent plays the Open Sicilian with White and the main-line Slav as Black, I think my winning chances might be better with Black on that day. Or it might just be a question of energy levels or mood. If you are tired or feeling down, it can be difficult to find the creative energy to make things happen with White. When you have Black, on the other hand, it seems to me that it is easier just to play solidly and react to your opponent's ideas.

In the last round of a strong open tournament on the Isle of Man I was below par and due to be playing the ferocious Hikaru Nakamura, who seemed typically determined to win. In the circumstances it was also important for me to win, but for personal reasons I was truly exhausted. I quickly realized that the best way to play was not to compete on the level of energy and determination, but just to react sensibly and hope that he might self-destruct. I still had the chess strength to 'be' on quite a high level but I knew that if I had to 'do' something I would be easily outplayed. This is reflected in what happened. By playing solidly I absorbed the early pressure and gained some advantage. Then I let it slip a bit when I had to think more concretely, but in time-trouble he seemed really worked up, while I was still subdued, and he made the final blunder, so I won. Again this doesn't prove anything, but I honestly think that if I had been playing White I would probably have lost that day. I had enough energy to plod along with sensible moves and react, but no energy to create, and given that Nakamura would rather jump in the Irish Sea than agree a draw, there would have been no escape.

Nakamura – Rowson

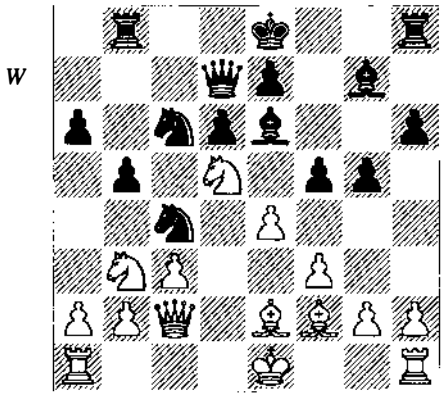
Port Erin 2004

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 a6 6 ♗e3 ♘g4

Although this move still looks adventurous, it is actually quite solid and it tends to lead to fairly quiet manoeuvring games.

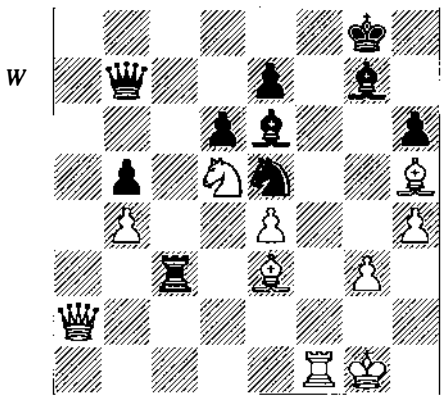
7 ♗c1 ♘f6 8 ♗e3 ♘g4 9 ♗g5 h6 10 ♗h4 g5 11 ♗g3 ♗g7 12 ♕d2 ♘c6 13 ♘b3 ♗e6 14 f3 ♘ge5 15 ♘d5 b5 16 ♗f2 ♖b8 17 c3 ♘c4 18 ♕c2 ♕d7 19 ♗e2 f5 *(D)*

I offered a draw with this move, because I felt my position was already slightly more comfortable, but I was also feeling grim and wanted the game to end. However, I didn't really expect my opponent to accept, and knew that this offer



might lead him to overestimate his chances later in the game.

20 0-0 fxe4 21 fxe4 0-0 22 a4 ♕b7 23 axb5 axb5 24 h4 g4 25 ♘d2 ♘4e5 26 b4 ♘g6 27 g3 ♘ge5 28 ♗e3 ♖bc8 29 ♕a2 ♘f3+!? 30 ♘xf3 gxf3 31 ♗xf3 ♘e5 32 ♗h5 ♖xf1+ 33 ♖xf1 ♖xc3 *(D)*



I think this is where my opponent lost the plot. He had been intending 34 ♘f6+ and when he realized that it wasn't working he seemed to become very flustered and started banging out his moves.

34 ♕d2?

When I saw the position resulting from 34 ♘f6+ ♗xf6 35 ♕xe6+ ♔g7 in advance, I felt it was safe, and it is. However, what must have been particularly annoying for my opponent was that 36 ♗f4 ♕xe4 37 ♗xe5 allows 37...♖xg3+! and Black wins. I only saw this when my opponent was pondering his 34th move, and while it vindicated my judgement, it also dulled my sense of danger. White should have played 34 ♗f4!, when Black is more comfortable, but the position remains tense.

34...♘c4?

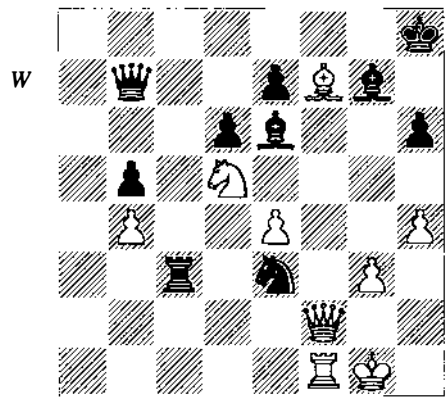
I should have kept it simple with 34...♖d3! 35 ♕f2 ♗xd5 36 exd5 ♕xd5, when I am clearly better, if not already winning. This is a good example of how over-reliance on intuition can let you down. Before this moment I had calculated very few variations and was playing almost entirely on instinct. Those same instincts led me to play 34...♘c4, but my instincts are fallible and 34...♘c4 is a very serious mistake.

35 ♕f2 ♘xe3 36 ♗f7+!

I had seen this coming, but made **the common mistake of thinking that since I had so many options, one of them must be good!**

36...♔h8 *(D)*

After 36...♗xf7 37 ♕xf7+ I saw the detail 37...♔h7 38 ♘f6+, but strangely I didn't appreciate that 37...♔h8 38 ♕e8+ ♔h7 39 ♘xe7 is decisive.



37 ♗xe6

Hikaru was furious with himself after the game because he felt that 37 ♘xc3! would have been winning easily. However, after the obligatory 37...♗xf7 38 ♕xe3 ♔g8, first pointed out by Peter Wells, Black has decent practical chances because the two bishops are almost as good as the rook and knight.

37...♘xd5 38 ♗xd5??

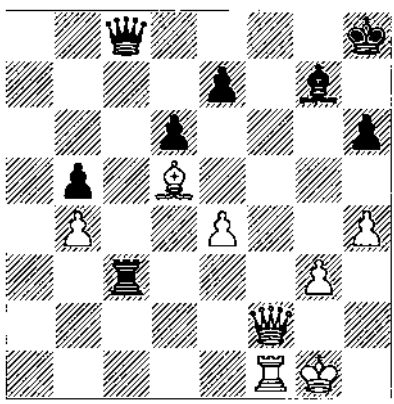
This was the real lemon, and now the position turns 360 degrees in one move. It is hard to

appreciate in time-trouble that control of the c8-h3 diagonal is of decisive importance.

38 exd5 looks merely unclear at first glance, but White has more pawn-shield and his bishop can be used for attack while mine cannot. After playing around with the position for a few minutes you will find that White is actually winning.

38...♕c8! *(D)*

W



Suddenly White's king faces a combined assault from three pieces. Hikaru didn't have time to find the only defence.

39 ♕e1?

39 ♖a1!, activating the rook at the cost of a pawn, limits the damage.

39...♗d4+ 40 ♔g2 ♖c2+ 41 ♔f3 h5 0-1

That game was decided by mutual blunders in time-trouble, but such blunders always arise out of the previous tension of the game and are never 'just blunders'. The fact that I had a good position when time-trouble began (and therefore put my opponent under pressure) was due to the fact that I made a lot of very sensible moves on intuitive grounds and also because I played an appropriate opening line for the way I was feeling. As I suggest in Chapter 13, statistics hold firm over a large number of games, but they do vary depending on the openings you play.

In this game I was glad to be playing Black and played quite well as a result. This made me wonder if there might also be a 'placebo' effect going on in the sense that players play better with White because they prefer being White. We shall consider this further in the next chapter, but now that we have considered two examples from practice, it is time to look at some different kinds of 'theory'.

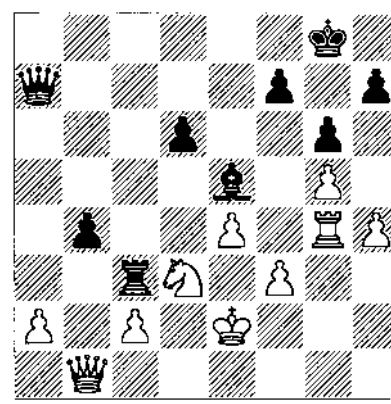
Hypertheory

If scientists were to succeed in finding a theory of everything, would humanity be any the wiser?
Question from an Oxford University Entrance Examination

An anthropologist trying to understand the culture of chess might learn a lot by observing kibitzing patterns on chess consoles like the ICC. During a big event like Linares or Wijk aan Zee, it is quite common to have a few thousand spectators on a particular board window, many kibitzing their thoughts on the position, many others asking questions, and some who clearly should be elsewhere. Most of the comments are fairly vacuous, along the lines of "Go Kasparov!", "These games are boring – bring back Tal!" and most of them are pretty volatile, like "Kramnik is winning!" "Kramnik is going down!" "Kramnik always draws!" often within the space of one or two moves.

On the final round of Linares 2004 I was watching the following game live on ICC:

B



Vallejo Pons – Kasparov
Linares 2004

The game had been very tense. For a long time it seemed like White might be better, but just before the time-control Kasparov whipped up some initiative and Vallejo felt compelled to capture a black pawn on b2 and take his king on a rather precarious adventure from b1 to e2. After the time-control, it felt to me like Kasparov should have a strong continuation, but I couldn't find anything convincing. Indeed, in the given position it no longer seemed so clear, because after Black attacks c2 with his queen, White need not defend it and lose coordination, but can play ♖g2 and ♔f1, which gives Black material equality in return for improving White's coordination. There had been a lot of criticism of the players at Linares for drawing so many games that year, and I felt sad that even this game, which was so rich and full of excitement, might also lead to a draw. It was especially painful because most of the kibitzers didn't seem to be thinking about the position, but rather cutting and pasting analysis from their analysis engines and passing it off as thought; e.g., "Gazza will win! Shredder says it's -0.67". In any case, while observing a torrent of baseless conjecture and trying to fish out the occasional sensible piece of analysis, I was struck by the following: *"Scumsfeld kibitzes: Deep Draw: 0.00".*

Wow, that is deep! Then I thought for a second, and started to smile. There is no such engine as 'Deep Draw', and if there was, he would represent a rather stiff marketing challenge to say the least! The game ended thus:

41...♕a4 42 ♖g2! ♖xc2+ 43 ♔f1 ♖c3 44 ♖d2 ♗g3 45 ♕xb4 ♕xb4 46 ♘xb4 ♖xf3+ 47 ♔g2 ♖a3 48 ♘c2 ♖c3 49 ♘d4 ♗f4 50 ♖c2 ♖d3 51 ♘b5 h6 52 gxh6 d5 53 h7+ ♔xh7 54 ♖f2 g5 ½-½

The sagacity contained in Scumsfeld's gem might well have been accidental ('Scumsfeld' no longer has an account on ICC, so I don't know who actually said it), but it made an impression on me, not because the game eventually was drawn, but rather because if you look at chess deeply enough you will find it difficult to avoid the conclusion that chess *is* a draw, as even Kasparov has said. Moreover, in many fascinating positions, if you really plunge to the heart of the matter you find that the drawing margin is rather large. Exactly *how* large, and how we could ever measure that, lie outside the scope of this book, but as any seasoned GM will tell you, in lousy positions there is considerable scope for effective resistance, and in seemingly commanding positions it is often impossible to force a win.

Which brings me back to the first move. If the main challenge to the conventional wisdom that White has some advantage concerns the intricacies of practice trumping the unreality of theory, the second challenge pulls in the opposite direction. Since the Informator system of classification was introduced in 1972 we are used to thinking of positions in terms of 'equal' '=', 'unclear' '∞', 'slight advantage' '⩲' or '⩱', 'clear advantage' '±' or '∓' and 'decisive advantage' '+−' or '−+'. This set of assessments is useful for commentators, but we have become so used to them that we forget they are just tools. **From a strictly theoretical perspective there can only be three correct assessments: winning for White, winning for Black or drawn; all other assessments are approximations based on our limited analytical means.** Thus the notion that White has some advantage is usually tentative because the whole idea of 'advantage' lies on shaky theoretical ground.

The notion of 'advantage' is just a commentators' tool, based on our judgement of practical chances. It can be a fact that the position is winning for White, or for Black, or that the position is drawn, but it cannot be a fact (at least not of the same kind) that White is slightly better. It might be a reasonable assessment, and a helpful thinking tool, but from a strict theoretical perspective it is meaningless. This raises the question of different kinds of theory in chess, and in particular the kind of 'hypertheory' that looks at chess from an absolute perspective.

In this respect I am fond of the Jewish proverb: *Man thinks, God laughs* because it reminds me to get my ideas in perspective. Whether we are thinking about religion, morality, politics or chess, our judgements are always based on limited information coming out of a particular

historical epoch. We do not have the capacity to see everything at once, as it really is, but if we could we would be astounded. In a chess sense this would mean seeing all possible variations correctly evaluated so that we know when the position tilts from one result to another. We are not even close to being able to do that at the moment, but if we ever did have that capacity, I suspect we would discover that a lot of the ideas we have about chess in the first decade of the twenty-first century are somewhat naïve and will look rather quaint fifty years from now.

In terms of variations and assessments, we have learned more about chess in the last ten years than we have in the previous two hundred years combined. The rate of change is going to keep on accelerating and it is unlikely that humans will be able to fully keep pace with these developments. Analytical engines are playing a huge part in opening preparation but they are still largely under human control. We ask them to find novelties on move 20 of the Grünfeld rather than asking them to find the best first move. Computers have certainly stretched our imaginations, and some moves that are now regarded as plausible might previously have been rejected on principle.

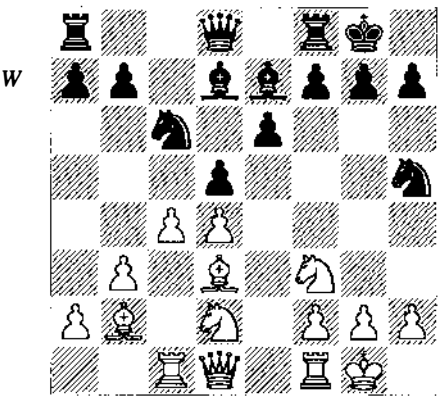
However, computers haven't yet fully cracked 'the exponential problem' to the extent that the game is solved. If and when this happens, and it is conceivable that it will be in my lifetime, I suspect we are in for further surprises. With this in mind, Jon Speelman once said that the initial position was a decisive reciprocal zugzwang and that White was losing. It was a joke, I hasten to add, but like all jokes it contained some interesting truth for the discerning person.

I personally think it is highly unlikely that White is in any sort of zugzwang on the first move, but by considering such absurd suggestions we may shed some light on more conventional questions. The point is that we should entertain the possibility that our current understanding of chess, although it seems extensive, may in fact be rather meagre. Certainly, if analytical engines continue to improve at their current exponential rate it won't be long before we can have clear and definitive assessments of most endgames, many middlegames, and, somewhat later, many openings too. However, if chess does ever begin to be solved in this way, it seems extremely unlikely that it will be recognizable as the game that we currently play.

The following two man-machine clashes, although somewhat dated, shed light on this idea.

Kasparov – Deep Blue
Philadelphia (game 6) 1996

1 ♘f3 d5 2 d4 c6 3 c4 e6 4 ♘bd2 ♘f6 5 e3 c5 6 b3 ♘c6 7 ♗b2 cxd4 8 exd4 ♗e7 9 ♖c1 0-0 10 ♗d3 ♗d7? 11 0-0 ♘h5? *(D)*



I love the following (very human!) commentary by Yasser Seirawan in *Inside Chess*:

"Huh? What does this have to do with the position? I can't comment on the move's merits, because the move simply doesn't have any! What I found most amusing was a post-mortem discussion with a computer scientist who explained to me that I should get used to moves like this one. In his view, as soon as computers beat even the strongest players, presumably like a drum, computers will completely rewrite opening theory and the distilled (human) wisdom of hundreds of years regarding openings will be trashed. Opening moves will be so deep, so unusual and so convoluted that my poor human grandmaster mind will not be able to comprehend the new (and forthcoming) computer openings, the text being a case in point. Further (perfect) computer versus computer match-ups

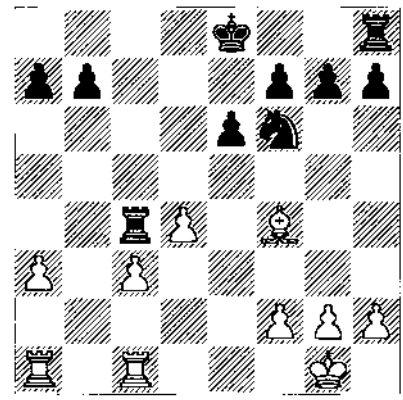
may prove that the text might actually be forced. Naturally you know what I thought of this! My peals of laughter could be heard throughout the lobby. Jeez, these guys have cheek. As an early teacher of mine once said, 'Black is cruising for a bruising'."

As it turned out, Kasparov made most of the computer's moves look stupid and actually beat Deep Blue "like a drum":

12 ♖e1 ♘f4 13 ♗b1 ♗d6 14 g3 ♘g6 15 ♘e5 ♖c8 16 ♘xd7 ♕xd7 17 ♘f3 ♗b4 18 ♖e3 ♖fd8 19 h4 ♘ge7 20 a3 ♗a5 21 b4 ♗c7 22 c5 ♖e8 23 ♕d3 g6 24 ♖e2 ♘f5 25 ♗c3 h5 26 b5 ♘ce7 27 ♗d2 ♔g7 28 a4 ♖a8 29 a5 a6 30 b6 ♗b8 31 ♗c2 ♘c6 32 ♗a4 ♖e7 33 ♗c3 ♘e5 34 dxe5 ♕xa4 35 ♘d4 ♘xd4 36 ♕xd4 ♕d7 37 ♗d2 ♖e8 38 ♗g5 ♖c8 39 ♗f6+ ♔h7 40 c6 bxc6 41 ♕c5 ♔h6 42 ♖b2 ♕b7 43 ♖b4 1-0

In light of the way the game went, Seirawan's 'peals of laughter' seem justified, but I think this was a case of an interesting point being lost through a bad example. 11...♘h5 looks a lot like a mistake, and violates much of what we understand about playing good chess. Moreover, in the given instance, it probably simply *is* a mistake, as was suggested by Kasparov's resounding victory and current computer analysis. However, the value of the computer scientist's point is not limited to one outlandish and unsuccessful move but goes beyond, by raising the crucial question of how different chess might look if computers ever managed to 'solve' the game.

If this ever happens, and there appears to be no insuperable barrier to prevent it, we would know the fact of the matter about which moves tilt the balance between a draw and a win. We might also discover, for instance, that 1 d4 leads to a draw in most variations, while 1 e4 wins in every line except the Najdorf! It is also possible, and personally I think it is more likely, that chess would look radically different, perhaps even unimaginably different. By this I mean that something that seems utterly ridiculous now, like claiming that 1 a4? is losing for White, while 1 a3!? is a draw and 1 b3! is winning, might turn out to be true, but for reasons that are beyond us now. So although 11...♘h5 is a mistake, we should get used to computers challenging us with moves like this that look wrong but have a deep supra-human explanation. The following game, from the same match, sheds some light on this:



Deep Blue – Kasparov
Philadelphia (game 3) 1996

Seirawan: "When I first saw this position on the board, I thought it might be all over very soon ... I anticipated moves like 20 ♔f1 ♘d5 21 ♗d2 ♔d7 22 ♔e2 ♖hc8 23 ♔d3 b5 when White's resignation would be on its way. Instead, the computer came up with an extraordinary conception:"

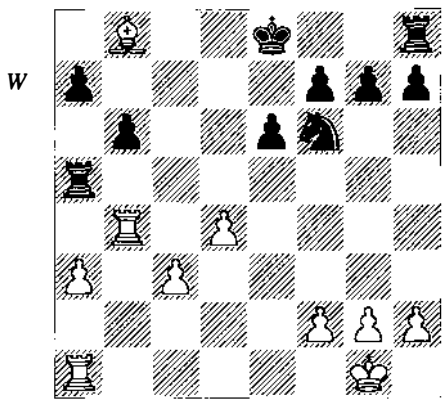
20 ♖cb1!!

A brilliant move. Deep Blue makes full use of all of White's pieces and targets Black's queenside before he has time to mobilize fully. White uses his available opportunities to minimize the problems caused by his damaged pawn-structure and potentially passive (defending c3) bishop. I can imagine many human players would see 20 ♖ab1 b6 and then more or less stop because there is no promising continuation. The key insight, which can be found only by trying to cause immediate problems for Black, is that White needs the a1-rook to defend a3 more than he needs the c1-rook to defend c3.

20...b6 21 ♗b8! ♖a4 22 ♖b4 ♖a5?! *(D)*

It seems that this move was inaccurate. Seirawan claims that if Black had anticipated 23 ♖c4, he would have foiled it with 22...♖a6! and thus gained the advantage: 23 ♖c4 0-0 24

♗d6 b5! (the point of ...♖a6) 25 ♗xf8 bxc4 26 ♗c5 ♘e4 27 ♖b1 (27 ♗b4 ♖b6 28 f3 ♘f6 29 ♗c5 ♖b7 30 a4 a6 31 a5 ♘d5 and Black is better) 27...g5 28 ♖b7 ♘xc3 29 ♖xa7? ♖xa7 30 ♗xa7 ♘b5! 31 ♗c5 c3 and Black wins. This is excellent analytical work, and the type of attention to detail that makes the difference between a decent international player and a world-class GM.

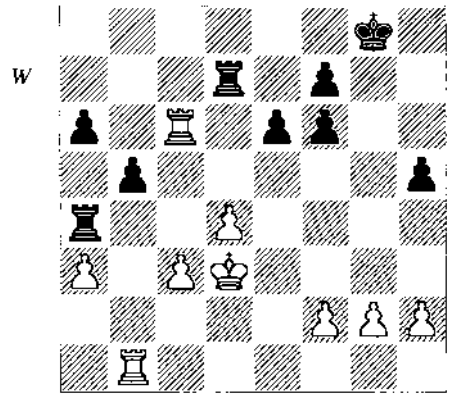


23 ♖c4!!

"The human hand instinctively reaches for the c3-pawn, anxious to control the d5-square and to prevent a positional squash. But after 23 c4 ♔e7 24 ♗e5 ♖c8, Black has a comfortable advantage and prepares for a knight manoeuvre and play against the c4/d4 complex. The text places the rook in front of the backward pawn, thereby covering the weakness, while activating the rook to the maximum. Very well played indeed." – Seirawan.

It is worth adding here that the computer has no notion of 'activating' the rook, 'covering the weakness', etc. Indeed the computer does not think in terms of these ideas, but rather through the brute force of an evaluation algorithm. Indeed, it is curious to consider the way we talk about chess in terms of ideas compared with the way an analytical engine churns out variations and evaluations. However, arguably all good evaluation engines require the input of certain ideas (e.g. deduct points if the king lacks a pawn-shield, even if there is no direct way to exploit it). In any case, White made a draw very comfortably after this move:

23...0-0 24 ♗d6 ♖a8 25 ♖c6 b5 26 ♔f1 ♖a4 27 ♖b1 a6 28 ♔e2 h5 29 ♔d3 ♖d8 30 ♗e7 ♖d7 31 ♗xf6 gxf6 *(D)*



32 ♖b3 ♔g7 33 ♔e3 e5 34 g3 exd4+ 35 cxd4 ♖e7+ 36 ♔f3 ♖d7 37 ♖d3 ♖axd4 38 ♖xd4 ♖xd4 39 ♖xa6 ½-½

While Seirawan's notes are typically instructive and entertaining, I feel he misses the connection between the move 11...♘h5? in game 6 and 23 ♖c4!! in game 3. Both of these moves look decidedly, even shockingly, odd, but it turns out that only one of them is good. However, I think what unites them (their oddness) is much more significant than what divides them (their strength) and had the computer scientist made his 'cheeky' comment above about 23 ♖c4! instead of 11...♘h5? we might have taken him more seriously. Indeed, I think we should be equally impressed by both moves, not because of their objective merits, but what they tell us about the disjunction between human and computer 'thought'.

Before proceeding I should just clarify that 'hypertheory' does not mean 'computer theory'. 'Hypertheory' is the omniscient view of chess, the view of chess 'under the aspect of eternity'. The reason I mention computers in this context is that chess is theoretically finite. No human could ever grasp chess from a hypertheoretical perspective, but in principle it should be possible for a machine to reach this fundamental perspective and develop 32-piece tablebases. This may take decades or even centuries,

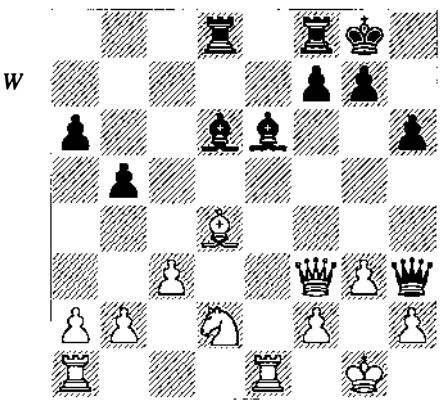
but unless runaway global warming or nuclear war gets in the way, I think it will eventually happen.

Elite Theory

The ladder of incomprehension, at any rate, is clear enough. I don't understand the arcana of the GMs; the GMs don't understand the arcana of Short and Kasparov; and Short and Kasparov don't understand the arcana of their own positions. None of us understands. How cheering.
MARTIN AMIS (commenting on the Kasparov-Short world championship match 1993)

Kasimdzhanov – Adams
Linares 2005

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♗b5 a6 4 ♗a4 ♘f6 5 0-0 ♗e7 6 ♖e1 b5 7 ♗b3 0-0 8 c3 d5 9 exd5 ♘xd5 10 ♘xe5 ♘xe5 11 ♖xe5 c6 12 d3 ♗d6 13 ♖e1 ♗f5 14 ♕f3 ♕h4 15 g3 ♕h3 16 ♗xd5 cxd5 17 ♗e3 ♗xd3 18 ♕xd5 ♖ad8 19 ♕f3 ♗f5 20 ♘d2 ♗e6 21 ♗d4 h6 *(D)*



I am not sure about you, but my first impression on seeing this position was that White is better. White is a clear pawn up, his king is not in any particular danger, his d4-bishop is excellent and Black has no particular ideas in the pipeline. I realize that Black's light-squared bishop is strong, and that the two bishops count for something, but is it really worth a whole pawn? Evidently so:

22 a3 ♗b8 23 ♕g2 ♕f5 24 f3 ♖fe8 25 ♘e4 ♗d5 26 ♖e2 ♖e6 27 ♖ae1 ½-½

Just when White seemed to be gaining control, he offered a draw, which was accepted.

Having looked at the final position for a while, and knowing that this sort of position is not untypical for the Marshall, I now accept that Black has full compensation for the pawn. But how many players in the world really understand that Black has full compensation? I am not sure, but I suspect that many of those who think they understand are just taking the result of the game as evidence, or possibly an annotator's word for it. More troubling is that I suspect if the position after 21...h6 were given as '±' it would be seen as significant and something for White to go for, while if it were given as '=' it would be thought that White needs some new ideas. For what it is worth, Fritz 8 seems to agree that Black is fine here and when I tried to relieve some tension by swapping pieces I found that it wasn't so easy: 27...♖de8 28 ♘d2 ♖xe2 29 ♖xe2 ♖xe2 30 ♕xe2 ♕c2! 31 ♕e8+ ♔h7 32 ♗e3 ♗a7 (Black could even consider playing for more here with a move like 32...♕d3) 33 ♗xa7 ♕xd2 34 ♕e3 ♕xe3+ 35 ♗xe3 ♗xf3 with a draw.

I chose this example not just because of the position that arose from the opening, but also because of the opening itself. In the early days of the Marshall, most players on the black side were hoping to whip up a decisive kingside attack in return for losing their e-pawn, but now they tend to be satisfied with the two bishops and some easy piece-play. Presumably Adams felt comfortable with his position out of the opening. Although he cannot play for a win from the resulting position, it is also very difficult for his opponent to play for a win without significant risk. This sort of 2700 'pact' is also seen in many lines of the Petroff where Black plays for a win indirectly, by provoking White into playing for a win, but accepts that he cannot really play for a win if White is satisfied to draw.

In any case, these are the kinds of players and the sort of positions that set the theoretical trends, and we learn their moves and think we are learning 'theory'. In this sense chess theory

is largely 'top down' in that it is largely set by the top few players in the world, with most of us as followers. Even among grandmasters, I frequently hear expressions like: "*they* don't do that now", "for some reason *they* have stopped playing that", "I don't understand why *they* don't do this – there must be something wrong with it but I can't see it..." and '*they*' tends to refer to the players within the top hundred or so.

'They' are not the only problem, because most of what passes for 'theory' in chess is not really theoretical in the normal language sense of the word. What we mean by 'theoretical' these days tends to be something like: 'notable games that have been documented and widely dispersed' but sometimes it means even less, and 'theory' simply means 'played before', regardless of by whom, and in what context.

The thing I find strange is that most players don't seem to realize that opening preparation is so much more important at the highest levels than it is for most players, even decent grandmasters. I felt this most acutely when I began teaching a new student around the beginning of 2005. He didn't have a published rating, but he seemed to love chess and be keen to improve. He explained that he had been studying hard, and that most of this study time was spent on learning opening theory, especially the King's Indian. From looking at positions together I felt that his playing strength was around 1400, though he did have flashes of inspiration that suggested he could become stronger. In any case, I suggested that studying openings probably wasn't the most effective way to improve. He looked surprised by this, and remarked that if it was good enough for the US Champion surely it was good enough for him too. I was taken aback, but realized that he was referring to an interview in *New in Chess* magazine, where Nakamura said that the only real chess work he did was on openings. I felt this was really tragic, because here was a 1400 or so player, in his thirties, with a very genuine desire to improve, trying to emulate one of the world's best and most precocious players. This strikes me as understandable, but also completely mistaken because there are different priorities at different levels of play. **It makes good sense to try to emulate the moves and ideas of the players you admire, but it is often a colossal mistake to try to emulate the kind of chess work they do, because something that helps a 2650 become 2750 will not necessarily help a 1650 become 1750, or even a 2550 become 2650.**

The main reason openings matter so much more at the elite level is that during the game the margin for error is so much smaller, and the level of concentration and technique is so much higher. This means that if you gain a serious advantage out of the opening there is a very real chance that you will win the game. Moreover, if you get nothing out of the opening it is much harder to outplay your opponent because they will normally know how to play chess rather well! You are not likely to win because your opponent exchanges the wrong pieces, or needlessly weakens his king, or blunders a pawn. As a result, your best chance of competitive success at the highest levels lies in getting a good position out of the opening.

Moreover, at the elite level, having White is valued because it gives you the initiative and also because it is thought to be relatively safe. You can apply some pressure, but if the position starts to turn in Black's favour, you usually have time to keep control of the game. If, however, you are Black, a slight inaccuracy might make your position turn from difficult to seriously uncomfortable and your opponent will usually try to create a position where you are relatively uncomfortable from the start. However, in recent years this view has been called into question, if only from an anecdotal perspective. In Linares 2004 Radjabov beat Kasparov with Black, and in Linares 2005, two noteworthy games were Vallejo-Topalov and Kasimdzhanov-Anand where White appeared to be playing for a draw in both cases, but lost badly. Moreover when Kasparov won Linares in 1999 with an emphatic +7 score, 5 of his wins were with Black.

We could site further examples of Black's success, but we could also (and more easily) find tournaments where White scored very heavily. The main point is that chess remains a game, full of mistakes, and that Black has decent practical chances at every level. I strongly

suspect that what matters most at all levels is not the colour you begin the game with, but the relevance of your preparation to that game, in particular whether you feel comfortable with the outcome of the opening, and whether it allows you to pose the opponent practical problems.

In any case, whatever we think of the importance of opening theory at the elite level, or why it is thought preferable to be White, it is not at all clear that the same rationales should apply at lower levels.

Our Theory

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
T.S. ELIOT

I have taught many students who crave to know the theoretical status of main-line positions in their beloved openings and get very excited by theoretical novelties in games among the world elite. Yet very few of their games are actually decided in the opening, and even fewer are decided because of their theoretical knowledge, or lack of it. Indeed, it seems rather sad to me that many chess-players end up learning 'theory' by imitating moves that they barely understand. As I suggested in Chapter 1, I believe this is because learning opening theory bolsters our chess identity and fills out our chess character, so that we feel we know who we are in the chess world.

In recent years, as a result of increased Internet access and computer software, there has been a proliferation of opening 'theory' and some think that conquering chess is all about learning this theory. I think this is completely mistaken for the vast majority of players, but it makes sense that many people think this way. As I've already said, at the elite level, say over 2670, openings are crucially important, and I believe the reason that players at lower levels think they matter so much is that we are fascinated by the superstars, and want to do what they do. Whether reading through magazines or reading the main illustrative games in an opening book, we are saturated with games from elite players, but **at the elite level the air is thinner, the ideas are deeper, and the same rules no longer apply**. Opening preparation is absolutely crucial for the elite trend-setters who rely on their openings to outplay their opponents from the outset, but they are much less so for this author and most of the readers of this book who play at levels where you frequently outplay your opponent or get outplayed, at every stage of the game.

So how much do openings matter for the rest of us? Above strong GM level, say 2570, I think openings matter a lot and often have a decisive bearing on the game, but there are many strong GMs who are not so good in the opening who still make excellent results by outplaying their opponent later in the game. Between 2300ish and 2550ish, they are quite important and you can gain a lot of points through careful preparation, though the level of technique is not usually so high that you won't have another chance if you go wrong. Between 2000 and 2300, it's rarely the most significant part of the game in terms of opportunities presented, but the outcome of the opening will often have a correlation with the final result. Below 2000, it will only tend to matter in terms of specific preparation for specific opponents in fairly predictable sharp or trap-intensive lines.

In addition to the desire to copy the superstars, another reason we spend a disproportionate amount of time learning opening theory is that unlike other kinds of chess work, the fruits of the labour are very tangible. If we learn a new opening idea we can usually imagine putting it into practice much more readily than if we learn any other kind of chess idea. However, this is a limitation of our imaginations rather than a true reflection of the kinds of work that will help us to improve. As I argued in Chapter 1, it is more important to increase your skill at playing chess than to increase your chess knowledge, especially opening knowledge, which will merely help you to get a good position, and won't give you the 'know-how' to do something with it.

No matter what you think of the importance of opening theory, it is difficult to deny that the

undercurrent of this 'theory' is consistently built around the same idea: that the normal outcome of an opening is for White to get a slight edge or for Black to equalize. On this model, the fruits of good opening preparation are posing problems with White and solving your problems with Black. In more practical terms, this often means looking through opening books or scanning games in ChessBase on the hunt for certain symbols. As Black we are looking for = or ∓ and we will gladly settle for ∞ even though it might turn out later that ∞ is in fact losing for Black on further analysis. With White we are delighted if we find ± but most of the time we content ourselves with the 'plus equals' sign: ⩲. This theoretical instrument is an important one, because it is closest thing we have to a symbolic representation of White's alleged advantage in chess. Therefore, I decided to give it a name:

Who's Afraid of the Plusequs?

In my experience, positions are often given the designation '⩲' for 'ideological' reasons. The idea that White should emerge from the opening with a small plus is so firmly ingrained in the psyches of most authors that they often judge a position to be ⩲ just because both sides seem to have played normally.

We are used to thinking of ideology in terms of political systems, particularly the opposing ideologies of capitalism and communism. However, a broader way to view ideology is as the intellectual background that serves to naturalize the status quo whereby whatever we think of as 'natural' is seen as natural because seen through the prism of an ideology, but may in fact be cultural or political. In this sense, ideology is the cultural soil in which ideas have to take root if they are going to grow. The soil is more susceptible to some ideas than others. It will allow some to grow quickly and freely while others will be ignored because too small, confused for something else, or rejected and smothered with weeds. In this sense, our 'folk psychology' (Chapter 2) grows out of the ideological soil, and the ideas that are deemed normal are not necessarily the best ideas, but those that have been allowed to grow.

As chess-players, it is because we are so close to our game that we cannot easily see 'chess ideology'. The soil in which new chess ideas have to grow is not neutral, and new ideas have to struggle for acceptance against a set of background assumptions that determines the quality and relevance of ideas. For instance, when I was contracted to write *Understanding the Grünfeld* in 1998 my publisher sent me a set of guidelines on how to write opening repertoire books. The guidelines on 'objectivity' and 'critical points' imply that correct opening play should lead to equality or a slight advantage for White; e.g., "Assuming the book is giving a repertoire against a fundamentally sound opening, then there are bound to be some places where Black has problems equalizing (or in a repertoire for White, where it is hard to get any advantage)". This guideline implies that there shouldn't be any lines in the book that emerge as slightly better for Black if none of White's moves have been criticized. That view might seem pretty uncontroversial, but it amounts to dictating terms to our game, and may risk excluding certain possibilities on principle rather than giving them a fair hearing on their own terms. This happens without anybody noticing because ideology is very subtle and we often don't realize the effect it has on us. Consider the following disparity in *Nunn's Chess Openings* (NCO) first pointed out to me by Scottish IM Douglas Bryson:

On page 361, there is a line given by Gallagher: 1 d4 d5 2 ♘c3 ♘f6 3 ♗g5 ♗f5 4 f3 ♘bd7 5 ♘xd5 ♘xd5 6 e4 h6 7 ♗h4 ♘e3 8 ♕d3 ♘xf1 9 exf5 ♘c5 10 ♕c3 ♘a4 11 ♕b3 ♘b6 =.

And in the same section there is a line: 1 d4 d5 2 ♗g5 f6 3 ♗f4 ♘c6 4 ♘f3 ♗f5 5 e3 ♕d7 6 a3 g5 7 ♗g3 h5 8 h3 e6 9 c4 ⩲.

These appear to be different variations, so on first blush it doesn't matter that in one case the position is equal and in the other it is slightly better for White. If you gave the matter no further thought you would probably think that 2...f6 wasn't a very good way to meet 2 ♗g5. I suspect this is true, but not because of the given

analysis. In the second line, where Black is supposedly worse, if he plays 4...♗g4 instead of 4...♗f5 we transpose directly to the first line, except with colours reversed! If we are to believe that line, then the main line goes 5 ♘bd2 ♘xd4 6 ♘xd4 e5 7 h3, etc., and leads to equality after 12 ♘b3.

This is all given in a side-note and is certainly not a critical line, but even so it is significant. As an author, I know how easy it can be to make mistakes in analysis, even with the assistance of analytical engines. However, making mistaken assessments is a more complex matter, because often our assessments are conceptual rather than analytical. Joe Gallagher is one of the most conscientious authors around, and I don't think he made this slip due to laziness. In the first line White tries something, it turns out not to be too dangerous, and Black 'equalizes'. In the second line, Black could try the very same thing and presumably then White would be the one who had to 'equalize'. Yet this variation is not considered, perhaps because Black would be the one initiating tactics, as early as move five. This example is one of many that makes me think that White's first-move advantage often reveals itself 'ideologically' and we don't realize the power it has over us. Moreover, I think 'the Plusequs' is an essential instrument in that ideology.

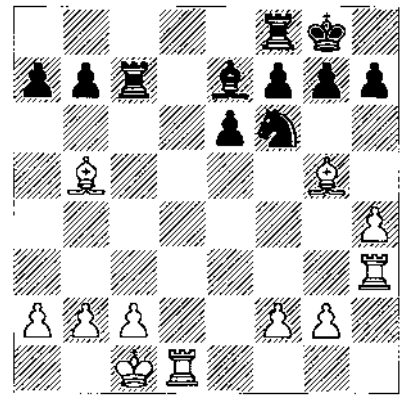
Rowson – Avrukh

European U-18 Ch, Zagan 1995

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 ♘c6 6 ♗g5 e6 7 ♕d2 ♗e7 8 0-0-0 ♘xd4 9 ♕xd4 0-0 10 e5 dxe5 11 ♕xe5 ♗d7 12 h4 ♖c8 13 ♖h3 ♕c7 14 ♕xc7 ♖xc7 15 ♘b5 ♗xb5 16 ♗xb5 *(D)*

This position is given as slightly better for White in many sources, most notably by Nunn and Gallagher in *Beating the Sicilian 3*. Without thinking about the position, it is easy to see why: White has two bishops and a queenside majority! However, the same position was described simply as 'a drawn ending' by Kramnik in a conversation with John Nunn, and when you look at the position more concretely you find that White can't really get anywhere. I tried and failed, and although I am sure White's

B



play can be improved, I don't think he has any advantage in the diagram position.

16...♖fc8 17 c3 a6 18 ♗f1 ♘e4 19 ♗xe7 ♖xe7 20 ♖f3 g6 21 ♗d3 ♘c5 22 ♗c2 ♖ec7 23 ♖e3 ♔g7 24 ♖e2 ♔f6 25 ♖d4 ♔e7 26 ♔d1 ♘d7 27 ♔e1 ♘b6 28 ♖b4 ♘d5 29 ♖d4 ♘b6 30 ♖b4 ♘d5 ½-½

Rowson – Turner

Edinburgh 2001

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 g6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♕xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3

5 ♗b5 ♘c6 6 ♗xc6 dxc6 7 ♕xd8+ ♔xd8 is another example of the tyranny of 'the Plusequs' because many sources still claim that this is ± here. However, this is 'ideological' in the sense that it somehow has to be true: White has played lots of natural moves so he 'must' be slightly better. In fact many games have shown that Black is very comfortable here, and due to the bishop-pair can look to the future with confidence.

My current impression is that the critical test of Black's opening is 5 e5 ♘c6 6 ♕a4 ♘d5 7 ♕e4!?.

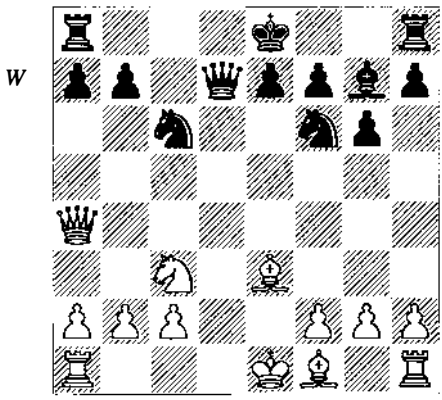
5...♘c6 6 ♕a4 d6 7 e5 dxe5 8 ♘xe5 ♗d7 9 ♘xd7

This certainly looks plausible. White takes the two bishops in an open position. Moreover he has that wonderfully overrated specimen, the queenside majority, so the scene is set for a ± assessment.

9 ♘xc6!? was thought to be more testing for a while, but Black has the unexpected 9...♕b6! (rather than 9...♗xc6 10 ♗b5, which gives

White some chances of gaining an edge due to his lead in development). Then it's hard to see how White can even pretend to be better.

9...♕xd7 10 ♗e3 ♗g7 *(D)*



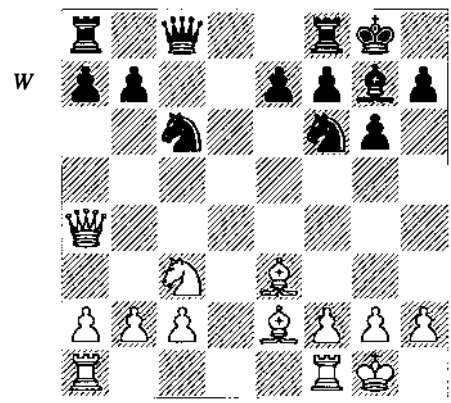
11 ♗e2

Here is where most sources stop and give the evaluation ±, possibly based on a casual appraisal: two bishops, queenside majority, open position. However, stronger players tend to have a more nuanced appraisal. The knight on c3 is awkwardly placed (blocking the c-pawn, vulnerable to the bishop on g7), and Black has lots of active possibilities, including ...a6 and ...b5 and various knight hops. It is not that White doesn't have chances to be better here, but to show that you have to look at the position very concretely and lead the way with some analysis. Stopping after a superficial conceptual appraisal means that some players will get this position as White and then be surprised that natural moves aren't enough to retain the advantage. In fact after 11 ♗e2 I suspect White is no longer better, but has chances to be better with a more precise approach: 11 ♖d1 ! and then:

a) 11...♕g4 looks premature due to 12 h3, when White more or less forces the queens off and gains the better ending. Note that in the ending, the queenside majority is more likely to be a trump, while in the middlegame, Black's extra centre pawn seems more important. This is something to do with the fact that White's queen gets in the way of the queenside pawns, but also because it's harder for Black to create any meaningful counterplay without the queens.

b) 11...♕c8 12 ♗b5 0-0 13 ♗xc6 bxc6 14 0-0. In this case White does seem to have a slight edge, but note that this has been possible only with extreme accuracy, not because of abstract positional considerations. For instance, trying to implement the same idea more casually doesn't work because 11 ♗b5 0-0 12 ♖d1 ♕f5! gives Black plenty of counterplay.

11...0-0 12 0-0 ♕c8! *(D)*



An odd-looking move, but played with the clear intent of continuing with ...a6 and ...b5. Now I suspect Black is equal, in spite of appearances. The problem for White is that the c3-knight is awkwardly placed and the queenside majority is currently more of a liability than an asset.

13 ♖ad1 a6 14 ♕h4 ♕f5 15 ♖d2 ♖ad8 16 ♖fd1 ♖xd2 17 ♖xd2 b5 18 a3 ♕e6!?

Intending ...♘e5-c4. The immediate 18...♘e5 is met by 19 a4!.

19 ♖d1 ♕f5 20 ♗d3 ♕c8

20...♕g4 is also fine.

21 ♗c1 ♖d8 22 ♖e1 b4 23 axb4

I offered a draw due to the tournament situation and the fact that I was running short of time. I also thought that 23...♖d4 24 ♕g3 ♘xb4 solved Black's problems, but this doesn't seem to be true due to tactical tricks: 25 ♖xe7 ♘xd3 26 cxd3 ♘d5 27 ♖e1 ♘xc3 28 bxc3 ♕xc3? (28...♖g4! 29 ♕e3 ♗xc3 30 ♕e8+ ♕xe8 31 ♖xe8+ ♔g7 =) 29 ♕b8+! ♗f8 30 ♕xf8+ ♔xf8 31 ♗h6+ winning. However, 24...♖xb4 seems to give Black enough activity.

½-½

Practice

In the Spring of 2000, when I was due to be playing super-solid world-class GM Predrag Nikolić in the Dutch League, one of my team-mates reminded me of how strong Nikolić is, but then, fearing he may have dented my confidence, he tried to boost it by saying, with a vexing smile: "But you have White!" as if that made up for the (then) 150 rating point gap, and the gulf in chess experience. My team-mate had good intentions, but I remember feeling strangely nauseous, as if I had just been deeply insulted.

As it turned out I didn't play Predrag then. However, I did play him later in the year, but with Black, in the game you are about to see. Lest you lick your lips too readily, the following game is interesting only in the sense that it's not very interesting at all. I have deliberately chosen to demonstrate the chess equivalent of the eponymous Joe Bloggs because I firmly believe that we need to ground ourselves in the vicissitudes of the mundane, before we can learn anything useful from the exceptional.

P. Nikolić – Rowson
Istanbul Olympiad 2000

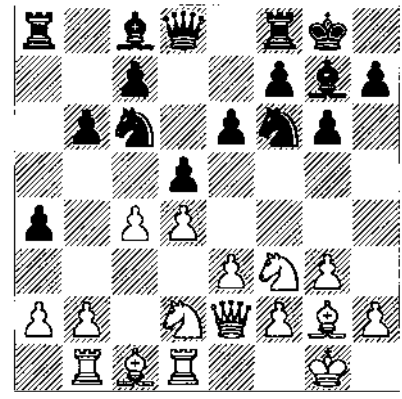
1 d4 ♘f6 2 ♘f3 g6 3 g3 ♗g7 4 ♗g2 d5 5 0-0 0-0 6 c4

When I asked Nikolić what he felt about the difference between playing White and Black he made a strikingly straightforward comment: "Well, with White I know that I will be able to get my pieces out and to castle, but with Black I don't always manage this."

Three years later, in P.Nikolić-Rowson, Selfoss 2003, Nikolić again managed to get his pieces out and castle against me, but he tried a different strand of the same opening: 6 ♘bd2 ♘c6 7 c4 a5!? 8 e3 a4 (the idea of pushing the a-pawn is to create some space, complicate White's queenside development and create some safe squares on the a-file for Black's pieces) 9 ♕e2 e6 10 ♖d1 b6 11 ♖b1 *(D)*.

Now I felt that if White achieved b3 followed by ♗b2 he would have no problems.

B



That seems true, but given that White has done nothing wrong, I probably shouldn't be trying to avoid him 'equalizing'! In any case, I now noticed a creative way to lose some time to compromise White's position and stop him from developing his pieces naturally: 11...♘b4!? (11...♗b7! 12 b3 axb3 13 axb3 ♕e7 14 ♗b2 ♘b4 to be followed with ...c5 is very comfortable for Black) 12 a3 ♘c6! (12...♘a2? looks more purposeful, but that bishop on c1 is really not worth the effort) 13 ♕d3! (this looks clumsy, but just as I took two moves to force a3, Predrag takes two moves to take his queen out of the line of a bishop on a6 and puts it on the c-file where it also eyes the potentially weak pawn on a4) 13...♗b7 14 ♕c2 (over the next five moves White somehow gains the upper hand, and I am not sure whether I really made a mistake or whether my ...♘b4 antics were not as good as they looked and that I am now slightly worse) 14...♕d6 15 ♘e1! (this is another strong quiet move, which improves the prospects of the f3-knight, the d2-knight and the g2-bishop) 15...♖fc8 16 ♘d3 ♘d7 (now I am planning ...♘e7 and ...c5, but my opponent interfered just in time) 17 ♘f4! ♘e7 18 cxd5 ♘xd5 (18...exd5 19 ♘c4! ♕f6 20 ♗d2 leads to a very tense position where there are a lot of tactics under the surface) 19 ♘e4! ♕e7 (19...♕f8!? 20 ♘c3 c5 is a more combative way to play, but I didn't yet feel the strategic danger in the structure that follows) 20 ♘c3! ♘xc3 21 bxc3! ♗xg2 22 ♔xg2. I am somewhat worse here. My a4-pawn is no longer a hero holding up two white units, but a liability disconnected from

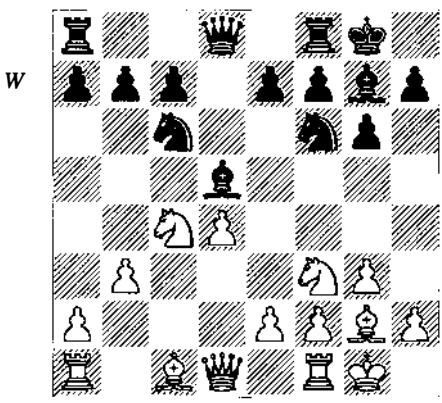
the rest of my position. If I ever play ...c5 my b-pawn will be very weak and it is not easy to play ...e5 without slightly messing up the coordination of my pieces. I soon lost a pawn but I was determined not to fall into the same pattern as the main game ('won' the opening, lost the game) and somehow I managed to save the game by confusing my opponent in a lost knight endgame.

Please forgive this lengthy tangent, but I wanted to give another example to show that the opening isn't really the issue – again I played the opening well, but was outplayed later, when it mattered more.

6...dxc4 7 ♘a3 ♘c6 8 ♘xc4 ♗e6

I gave quite a thorough coverage of this line in *Understanding the Grünfeld*. White has more space, but Black is very solid, and as long as he keeps control of the d5- and e4-squares he can undertake various strategic operations like gaining queenside space, exchanging light-squared bishops or trying to engineer a pawn-break in the centre.

9 b3 ♗d5 *(D)*



10 ♗a3?!

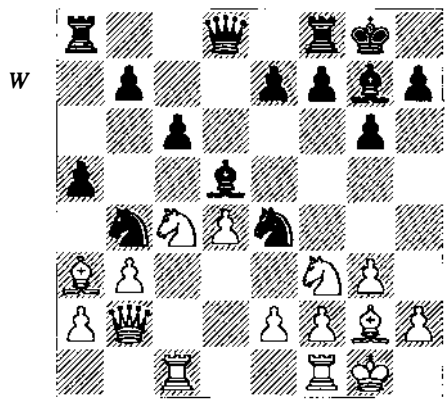
A novelty, but not a very good one. Before the game I spent a long time looking at 10 ♗b2 a5 11 a4!?. It looks strange to weaken b4 like this, but this is a principled move because White is simply trying to prevent Black from becoming active, and intends gradually to make use of his space advantage. I was intending 11...h6!? 12 ♖c1 ♕c8 followed by ...♕e6 and ..♖fd8, when Black's position will be well-organized. I was a bit nervous about this slightly artificial manoeuvre but I was even more nervous when Nikolić played 10 ♗a3 because I assumed a world-class player who had played this line all his life would have studied this position very deeply, and this move rather unpleasantly eyes my e-pawn. Now I think it's more likely that it's just something he thought up at the board to make me think for myself.

10...a5!

It's important to try to shut out his bishop with ...♘b4.

11 ♖c1 ♘b4 12 ♕d2 ♘e4 13 ♕b2 c6! *(D)*

Wisely refraining from 13...c5!?, which appears to play into White's hands after 14 ♖fd1 with the idea of ♕b1.



14 ♖fd1?!

A bit aimless. The position is still finely balanced after 14 ♕b1!? with the idea that 14...♘d6 15 ♘xd6 exd6 16 e4 is promising for White. However, 14...♖e8!? might be a suitable echo, renewing the 'threat' of ...♘d6, when the position remains tense.

14...♘d6!

Intending to continue ...♘b5, which would earn me White's a3-bishop, so White is effectively forced to improve my structure.

15 ♘xd6 exd6

Why do I say my structure has improved? There is no formal improvement because I still have two pawn-islands, but now I have much greater central control and a more plausible ...c5 break. The half-open e-file also makes it easier for me to prevent e4.

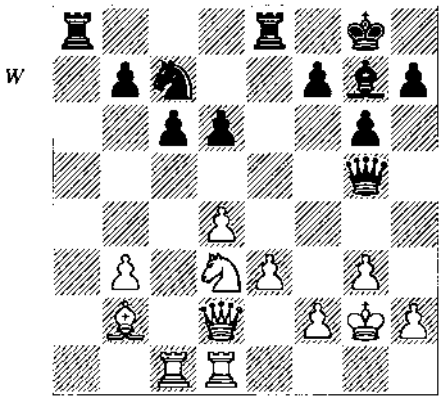
16 ♕d2 ♖e8 17 e3

17 ♗xb4 axb4 18 ♘e1 ♗xg2 19 ♔xg2 ♕a5 20 ♖c2 d5 21 ♘d3 ♗f8 and Black is slightly better.

17...♘a6!

This prevents White from capturing on b4 followed by ♘e1, which might simplify the position in his favour at some point.

18 ♘e1 ♗xg2 19 ♔xg2 ♘c7 20 ♘d3 a4 21 ♗b2 axb3 22 axb3 ♕g5 *(D)*



Black is at least slightly better here ('the equeplus'!) because his pieces are much more mobile, and White has weakened light squares and a vulnerable b-pawn. Black has control over the position, but it's not easy for him to do anything. This is quite a good example of what I mean when I say that most 'slight advantage' assessments are fairly meaningless. Certain positional factors mean that my position should be the more comfortable to play, but 'comfort' is highly subjective, and I suspect the more experienced player was the more 'comfortable' here in the only sense that really matters. This is reflected in the fact that from here on my play goes downhill.

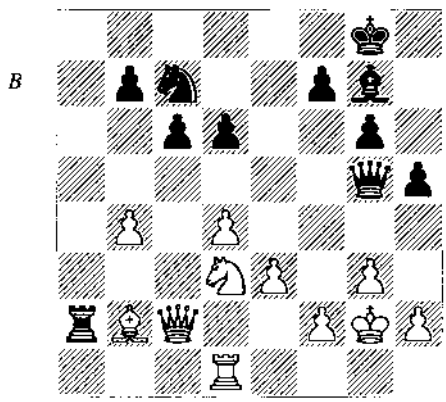
23 b4 h5!?

This is a perfectly good move, but I had no particular idea what I was doing here and was probably just trying to force him into the anti-positional h4, which adds to his light-square problems. 23...h5 also has the drawback that if I ever want to challenge the e4-square by playing ...f5, the g6-pawn is quite seriously weakened.

It has taken me a while to develop a feel for how to deal with such situations. There is a natural tendency to try to look for 'solutions' in such positions – something sufficiently compelling that it removes the anguish of having to think from move to move. 23...h5 has that feel to it – because it looks like it 'does something' – but it doesn't really do much for my position at all. It would have been much better to invest some time and find some kind of plan here, if only to 'pencil in'. This makes it easier to play quickly and tends to make you more confident. In this case I think my best idea is to play ...d5 and try to bring my knight to c4. This is by no means terrifying for White, but at least it is a clear idea, doesn't spoil much and White doesn't have any obvious answer. 23...♘b5!? 24 ♖a1 d5 25 ♘c5 ♘d6 26 ♖xa8 ♖xa8 27 ♖a1 ♖xa1 28 ♗xa1 ♕f5 29 ♕d3 ♕c8!? and Black seems to keep some advantage with virtually no risk.

24 ♕e2 ♖a2 25 ♖a1 ♖ea8 26 ♖xa2 ♖xa2 27 ♕c2! *(D)*

Wisely keeping a pair of rooks on the board and thus making it harder for my queen to infiltrate. 27 ♖a1 ♖xa1 28 ♗xa1 ♕d5+ 29 f3 ♕c4 is unpleasant for White because ...♘d5 and ...♗h6 are in the air.



27...♕f5 28 ♕b3 ♖a8

28...♕d5+ 29 ♕xd5 ♘xd5 is very good after 30 ♖a1? ♘xb4! but drawish after 30 ♖b1.

29 f3 ♘d5 30 ♘f2

Now I have a fairly major dose of *Looseness* (see *7DCS*) and spoil my position. I could still have kept some pressure with 30...♕c2! 31 ♖d3

♕b1, but even here White seems to hold with careful play:

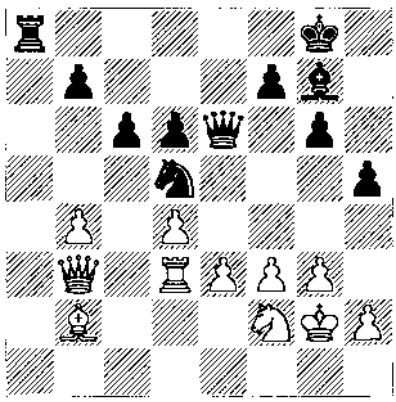
a) 32 ♖d1? loses to 32...♘xe3+!.

b) 32 e4 ♖a2 33 ♘d1 ♘b6! (not the seemingly consistent 33...♘xb4 due to 34 ♖d2 with the idea of ♘c3, which is surprisingly good for White) 34 ♖d2 ♘a4 35 e5 ♘xb2 36 ♘c3 ♕e1! 37 ♖e2 ♘d1! 38 ♕xa2 ♕xc3 and Black wins.

c) 32 b5! ♖a2 33 ♘d1 ♗h6 34 bxc6 bxc6 35 ♔f2. Black seems to have done everything to breach the defences, but somehow White still holds.

30...♕e6? 31 ♖d3 *(D)*

B



Suddenly e4 is a threat and I am losing control of the game. With time-trouble tickling my nerves, I panicked.

31...♖a2??

31...♘b6 leaves the game roughly level, but I was still trying to prove that I was better.

32 e4

Ouch! A complete reversal. Now if the knight moves, d5 will win material.

32...♖xb2 33 ♕xb2 ♘b6 34 ♕c1 ♕e7 35 h4 ♘d7 36 ♕a3 d5 37 ♕a5 dxe4 38 fxe4 ♘f6 39 e5 ♘d5 40 ♖b3 g5 41 ♕a8+ ♗f8 42 ♕c8 gxh4 43 ♕f5 ♗h6 44 ♘e4 ♕d8 45 ♘d6 1-0

Not a great game, but we can learn a lot from it nonetheless. Firstly, the result had nothing directly to do with the colour I was playing and little to do with the opening. Black was quickly slightly better, even though White made only a couple of almost imperceptible errors in the opening. Secondly, **there were lots of mistakes, as there are in all but the very best games at the very highest levels of chess.** I know I have said this before, but I believe it is a really crucial point, because it takes the venom out of any theoretical claim about the first-move advantage (it still has bite, but it doesn't kill you!). Even if you don't accept all my ideas relating to the first-move issue, I hope you will at least accept that most games are not decided, nor even irredeemably affected because White moves first but rather because most chess-players make several errors in most of their games.

In the given example, I lost mainly because I didn't know what to do with my position other than enjoy its pleasant appearance. This was due to a certain lack of resolve, and the fact that Nikolić is much better at 'Being' than me. Another notable feature of this game is that even when Black gained the upper hand, White had significant defensive resources. More generally, **it seems that early mistakes tend to be less costly for White because he can use his 'extra half-move' to defend.**

'Extra half-move?' Well not exactly, but that's often how it feels. John Nunn pointed out to me that White's advantage consists primarily of the fact that in most positions we would rather have the move than let our opponent have it, and White enjoys this predicament just slightly more frequently than Black. Indeed, given that White starts the game, it sometimes seems that Black spends his time trying to 'catch up' with White, who always seems one step ahead. However, I am not sure how to square this with one of Julian Hodgson's many pithy comments, which I heard him make to someone about to play a stronger player: "Don't worry, just remember that for every move he makes you get one back."

One way to frame it is that **it's not so much that White gets more moves than Black, but rather that because he moves *before* Black, he can make it harder for Black to play moves that are as effective as the ones just made by White.** Rationally, it feels like this should stop after a certain point in the game, and even reverse completely, but I know from my own experience that when I take over the initiative as Black, it is not as easy to make it

count. In any case, Swedish GM Jonny Hector feels this defensive capability is an important part of White's advantage – that when White takes the initiative Black is already under some pressure but when Black gains the ascendancy White somehow seems to have a little extra time to make amends.

I think this issue relates to Yemolinsky's idea of trends that I explored in *7DCS*. When White's advantage increases there is no change in trend, but when Black begins to take the initiative it is easier to sense the need to make an adjustment. This view seems to be shared by John Nunn who thinks that, at least at grandmaster level, White's score is somewhat inflated by the fact that if things start to go wrong for White, he often offers a draw to buck the unfavourable trend, while when things begin to go well for Black he often overestimates his prospects and pushes too hard for the win.

So far we have merely scratched the surface of the first-move issue, and in the next chapter we begin to look a bit more systematically. For now we should consider where this chapter has taken us.

Conclusions:

1) 'Ceteris' is never 'paribus' in a game of chess and whatever advantage White is supposed to have according to the statistics is a relatively minor factor compared to all the other circumstances that affect the result of a game.

2) Sometimes it is better to have Black, depending on your mood, energy levels and expected opening, etc.

3) There are lots of things that we don't know about chess, and we should temper our judgements accordingly. Positional assessments are always approximations and strictly meaningless in the sense that there are only three ultimate assessments: winning for White, winning for Black, or drawn.

4) Opening preparation matters much more at elite grandmaster level than at lower levels of play.

5) Don't be afraid of 'the Plusequs' (±) because it is often there for 'ideological' reasons.

6) We all make lots and lots of mistakes and the gap between theory and practice is a chasm.

12 White's Advantage

Artur Yusupov once explained the advantage of the first move in chess to me analogously, in terms of the advantage of the serve in tennis[13]. The tennis player who serves has many advantages over his adversary:

1) The possibility of an ace.
2) The pace of the serve.
3) Where to put the ball.
4) A second chance.

In chess terms this translates roughly as follows:

1) Some players play very aggressively with White, and attack from the outset. Such players often have sharp opening ideas or even innovations up their sleeves and these are more likely to be decisive than the equivalent ideas or innovations for Black. Moreover, it is possible to play a kind of 'serve and volley chess', with the serve usually being 1 e4 and the volley being sharp opening theory (see Radjabov-Rowson below). This resonates with Nikolić's comment from the last chapter: "With White I know that I will manage to get my pieces out and to castle, but with Black I don't always manage to do this." Sometimes the power of the 'serve' is such that even strong GMs don't manage to finish their development.

2) The pace of the game is largely White's prerogative and it is easier for White to channel the game towards his/her style. For instance if my opponent plays the Sicilian Dragon, I might normally head for a theoretical tussle, but if I've been stuck in traffic before the game and feel a little drained, I might play a sideline like 2 b3 or perhaps the Closed Sicilian, and hope that my energy comes back in time for the middlegame battle. On the other hand, if I were Black in the same circumstances, it's quite difficult to deviate without knowing another opening quite well, because the margin for error is relatively small. Therefore I might end up having to play a sharp theoretical opening, even when I am not really up for it.

3) If you think your opponent has a relatively weak 'back hand', you can force your opponent to play with relatively weak strokes by placing the ball in such a way that a back hand is necessary. In chess this means that White can decide on the type of game he wants to play more freely than Black, and if Black has clear strengths and weaknesses, this advantage is very useful. These days, when you can usually know your opponent's preferences before the game, it is quite a significant advantage to be able to 'place the ball' in such a way that your opponent may not be able to play to their strengths. Black certainly has flexibility in his choice of reaction, but unlike White, he has to cover all possible lines, while White, who selects the first move, can immediately home in on the relevant material. I know this from bitter personal experience. For a long time I was happy playing against 1 e4 (Najdorf), 1 d4 (Grünfeld) and 1 c4 (1...e5) but I didn't have a very good answer to 1 ♘f3 and after my opponents realized this, they started playing 1 ♘f3 against me more than I would have liked! Needless to say, the way to neutralize this kind of advantage as Black is through careful preparation and developing a more universal style of play.

4) There is no 'second serve' in chess, but it is true that White is more likely to get a second chance than Black. In most cases, if White goes slightly wrong, he is likely to face an equal or slightly worse position, but if Black goes wrong he is often significantly worse.

The Initiative

Most of us know from experience that these four factors constitute some 'initiative' for White, but what is 'the initiative' and how does

it relate to 'the advantage'? Mihai Suba's superlative book *Dynamic Chess Strategy* includes the following 'suggestions' (Suba doesn't think 'definitions' are good for you): "The side with the freer choice of moves, more possibilities to attack and less to defend, and whose position is less likely to be spoiled if he simply plays natural moves, is supposed to have the initiative... The initiative is a subjective advantage. It creates promises of gaining an objective advantage when the opponent goes wrong, which is an event likely to happen when one's position is under pressure. Initiative is also a dynamic advantage when it helps you to gain time, provoking passive moves by active moves. Above all the initiative is a psychological advantage, exploiting human nature as well as the possibilities contained in the position. That's why they say 'it gives more practical chances', or 'the upper hand'. That 'there is no perfect play' is its main supposition..."

To my mind, Suba's description of 'the initiative' captures the nature of 'White's advantage' extremely well. So much so that I think we can definitely say that White has 'the initiative' at the start of the game. White has 'a freer choice of moves', 'more possibilities to attack', 'less to defend'. It is also easier for White to play 'naturally' without spoiling his position. However, the most interesting point is that the initiative is a *subjective* advantage in the sense that we *prefer* to have it than not have it, perhaps because it gives us the impression that we are in control of events. In this respect I am reminded that Matthew Sadler defined the initiative using a soccer analogy: the player who has the initiative is like 'the side with the ball', and every soccer player wants to have the ball!

But is it a real 'advantage' to have the initiative? Certainly in soccer having possession is considered important, but we all know that possession can be lost, and much more important than possession is the relative quality of the teams. Likewise in chess, more important than having the initiative is having the position with more 'Quality' and I think the key to success with Black is not allowing White's initiative to provoke you into compromising the quality of your position without good reason.

Suba seems to think that having the initiative is a kind of advantage in that it encourages the opponent to play passively and make mistakes, but he doesn't consider it an advantage as such. He seems to be saying the initiative is really a 'feel-good factor' that matters to humans, but somehow shouldn't really be considered 'an objective advantage'. The initiative often becomes an objective advantage because of psychological dynamics that arise from one side having the initiative, but the 'initiative' does not have an objective anchor in the position. However, in terms of the four-dimensional view of chess, the initiative certainly gives some advantage in terms of Opportunity and also often in terms of Time, because when you have the initiative the opponent has more to think about. **My understanding is therefore that the initiative usually does count as a real advantage in games between humans, but that it doesn't have to.**

A way of testing the idea that White's advantage amounts to 'the initiative' (on Suba's definition) would be games between computers. If 'the initiative' is purely subjective or psychological, and if White's advantage in chess is primarily that he begins with the initiative, then White's advantage should be almost non-existent in games between computers because the psychological and subjective elements don't play any role. I haven't done a statistical check on this, and computers haven't been competing against each other for long enough to give compelling data, but I would be interested to know the results. However, even if we learned that White made a similar score in games between computers (compared to games between humans), it could be argued that this is due to computers being fed human opening repertoires, which are largely based on White having 'the initiative' and Black trying to keep it at bay. This is food for thought, but I am not sure it is particularly nourishing, because when computers get just a little bit stronger I think we will find that they start drawing almost all of their games against each other.

More useful for our purposes is getting clearer about what the initiative means for humans. Part of the reason Suba doesn't simply

consider the initiative an advantage is revealed later on in his discussion of the matter: "I think initiative is just an exterior aspect of dynamism. It is a continuous consumption and regeneration of dynamism, and a change in the balance of these two elements may jeopardize potential." We shall come to the meaning of 'dynamism' and 'potential' in the next chapter, but what he is saying here is that the initiative should not be thought of as permanent, but temporary and changeable, and that you can harm your long-term prospects if you carry on playing as if you had the initiative when you no longer do. He then asks himself: "Is that why you sometimes lose the initiative without any logical explanation?" and he answers "**Yes. Sometimes you must lose it, just like that.** If you try to cling to it, by forcing the issue, your dynamic potential will become exhausted and you won't be able to face a vigorous counter-attack."

We shall explore this issue more fully in the next chapter, but Suba seems to be saying that although having the initiative gives us the impression of control, it is just an impression, and in one sense the initiative has a life of its own. Sometimes it is channelled into an objective positional advantage, but sometimes it just burns out without transforming into anything positive, and sometimes it even passes to the opponent.

In any case, before proceeding I should state that my personal view is that 'White's advantage' in practical play is 'the initiative', and success with White is primarily about making the most of the initiative, while success with Black is about seeing through the initiative, and being patient in your dealings with it.

Serve-and-Volley Chess

One of the ways that White can try to 'make the most of the initiative' is through deep theoretical preparation. Such preparation usually involves considering Black's attempts to play against the initiative in detail, and then, as far as possible, refuting them. It also helps sometimes if you have an aggressive spirit and are seeking to pose your opponent problems from the outset. I was on the other side of this kind of attitude in the following game and was given a firm lesson in how to 'serve' with powerful opening preparation and then 'volley' with accurate calculation.

Radjabov – Rowson
Calvia Olympiad 2004

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 cxd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘f6 5 ♘c3 a6 6 ♗g5

I used to enjoy playing against this move, but these days I am rather scared of it. It has been knocked out of fashion by 6 ♗e3, which in some ways is easier to understand (in most cases the aim is to go f3, ♕d2, 0-0-0, g4 and h4), but 6 ♗g5 remains the most nakedly aggressive move and one that requires Black to be theoretically clued up, even if most of the theory is not particularly topical.

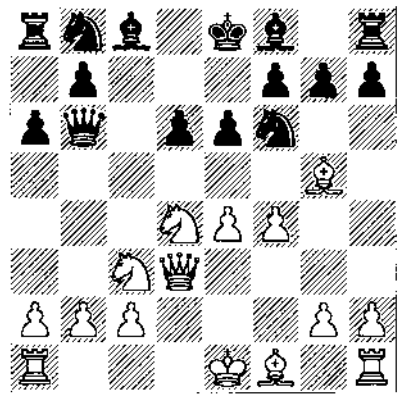
6...e6 7 f4 ♕b6

The critical move, and the one that would put me off playing this way as White.

8 ♕d3!? *(D)*

This move is much less popular than 8 ♕d2, but every bit as dangerous, especially if you haven't given it a huge amount of thought. I couldn't remember anything about this move at the time, but my next move was easy enough, although I did take a minute to check that the queen being on d3 instead of d2 didn't allow him to trap my queen!

B



8...♕xb2 9 ♖b1 ♕a3 10 f5

I was determined not to fall too far behind on the clock, so I used my knowledge of the 8 ♕d2

line to infer that I could play ...♗e7 here, because White no longer had the ♗c4 resource.

10...♗e7

With the queen on d2 White would now take on e6 and play ♗c4.

11 ♗e2 ♕a5

This doesn't look forced but it's not easy to find another constructive move.

11...0-0 12 ♘d5 ♕a5+ 13 ♗d2 ♕d8 14 ♘b6 ♖a7 15 ♗e3 is not promising for Black.

I didn't like the look of 11...♘c6 12 fxe6 fxe6 13 ♘xc6 bxc6 14 0-0 because I can't castle. It seems that having this ♘d5 trick is one of the main ideas behind ♕d3. After 14...♕a5, 15 ♗d2! shows another bonus – having d2 for the bishop allows White to gain even more time against the black queen.

12 ♗d2 ♕c7

I had a feeling that I shouldn't retreat my queen too willingly, but more generally there was too much going on in my head. I had played Radjabov twice before, but both games had been fairly uneventful draws. He had since grown into a world-class player and held his own in Linares earlier that year. I think I had been expecting 1 d4 in this game, and a more positional struggle, but already I was being forced to find difficult moves just out of the opening. I wasn't scared at this point, because I believed in my position, and I knew that I was strong enough to beat Radjabov if he failed to find compensation for the mess on the queenside. However, on a basic intuitive level, I did sense that on this particular day I was up against an irresistible force, and alas, that I was not an immovable object.

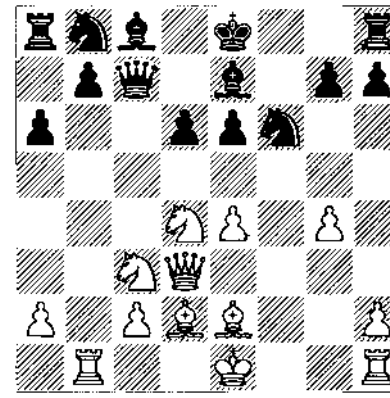
13 fxe6! fxe6 14 g4! *(D)*

I saw this idea just after retreating my queen. These two moves, taking on e6 and playing g4, rarely go together. However, in this case Teimour wanted to prevent me from closing the position with ...e5 and noticed that I have some immediate problems with my f6-knight.

14...h6

This seems forced, and I should probably have played it more quickly. I wasted time looking into White's follow-up. When you realize you have to do something, you just have to do it, and let your opponent worry about his options in his own time.

B



After 14...0-0 15 g5 ♘e8 16 ♗g4 the black position collapses.

14...♘c6 15 g5 ♘xd4 16 ♕xd4 e5 17 ♕a4+ (I should have stopped analysing here, but I looked a bit further...) 17...♘d7 18 ♘d5 ♕b8 19 ♘b6 ♗d8 20 ♘xa8 ♕xa8. It took me too long to realize that I don't have enough compensation for the exchange because I don't have any pieces out! I should have accepted this immediately.

15 e5

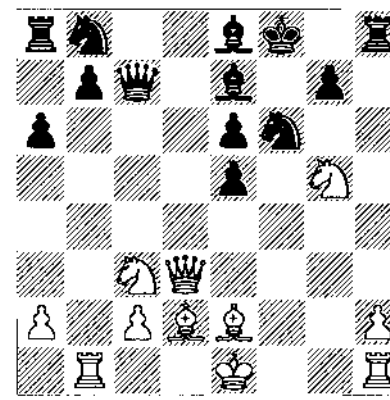
I actually saw the line 15 ♕h3!? g5 16 ♗xg5 ♕c5! in my head when I was returning to the board with a cup of coffee, and it gave me a jolt of optimism, but when I arrived back to the board he had already played the more obvious move.

15...dxe5 16 ♕g6+ ♔f8 17 ♘f3 ♗d7!

I had foreseen this when playing 14...h6. It is imperative to evict the large lady loitering with intent so close to my king.

18 g5 ♗e8! 19 ♕d3 hxg5 20 ♘xg5 *(D)*

B



So far so good. I have played correctly and taken perhaps just a little longer than I should have. In this sense I have managed to 'return' White's 'serve'. However, to extend the metaphor you could say that I was knocked off balance in the process, so I wasn't fully ready for the 'volley' that follows. Moreover, here I made the mistake of thinking I was over the worst when in fact I have to dig deep to find another good move.

20...♗f7?

Superficial. I didn't see White's follow-up, and nor did Teimour at first because he thought for about twenty minutes here. I think the appeal of 20...♗f7 arose from associating White's attack too much with the knight on g5 rather than taking in the manifold elements of the position as a whole. As a result, without looking more closely, I felt that if he took my bishop on f7 he would lose his most important attacker and 'improve' the position of my king.

20...♔g8! is the best move. Teimour pointed this out in the post-mortem. He felt that in that case the position was unclear. However, after a little probing it became clear to me that he had already analysed this position at home! This is move 20 in a relatively obscure line, but he had already considered it in some depth! Naturally, he wouldn't disclose his thoughts about this position, but White seems to have two possibilities: 21 ♕g3 looks best and the position remains tense, while 21 ♕c4 is an attempt to bail out for a draw. The latter seems like a failure in some ways, but remember that Black has had to play a lot of good moves to get this far and if the 'worst case scenario' for White is a draw, and this only transpires when Black plays perfectly, then playing such a line is fully justified from a pragmatic point of view.

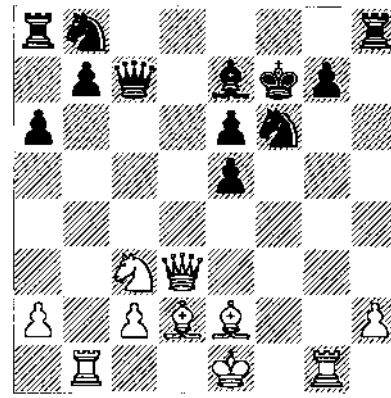
21 ♘xf7!

The beginning of the 'volley'. White removes an important defender of the light squares and brings up the heavy reserves.

21 ♕g6!? is more tempting but less dangerous. There is an interesting overlap with this move and 12 d5! in my game against Korchnoi. Again I think I saw 21 ♕g6 just after I played 20...♗f7, not before it, but after the game I told myself that I had seen it and what is more, that I had correctly assessed the consequences. It is fortunate that the move is not as strong as it is shocking. After 21...♗xg6 22 ♘xe6+ ♔g8 23 ♘xc7 ♖a7 24 ♗e3 b6 Black is at least OK.

21...♔xf7 22 ♖g1! *(D)*

B



Simple chess, bringing the last piece into play and introducing the threat of ♕g6+. It turns out this transparent threat cannot be parried without seriously compromising Black's position.

22...♗d8

Although this keeps an eye on f6, it looks artificial and it's not surprising that White has a strong reply. However, I think my position was already beyond repair:

a) 22...♗c5 23 ♕g6+ ♔g8 (23...♔f8 24 ♖f1 ♘bd7 25 ♘e4 ♖e8! 26 ♘xf6 ♘xf6 27 ♖xf6+ gxf6 28 ♕xf6+ ♔g8 29 ♕g6+ ♔f8 30 ♖b3) 24 ♕xf6 ♗xg1 25 ♕xe6+ ♕f7 26 ♕c8+ ♔h7 27 ♗d3+ g6 28 ♗xg6+! ♔xg6 29 ♕g4+ ♔h7 30 ♘e4 wins for White.

b) 22...♔g8 23 ♕g6 ♖h7 24 ♗d3 ♗d8 25 ♘e4 ♘bd7 26 ♗h6 and, just for a change, Black will be mated: 26...♘f8 27 ♘xf6+ ♗xf6 28 ♕xf6.

23 ♘e4!

Radjabov systematically removes my defenders.

23...♘xe4 24 ♕xe4

Gaining a crucial tempo on b7 – otherwise ...♘d7-f6 might give me chances to survive.

24...♘c6 25 ♕g6+ ♔f8

I must have been dazed by White's onslaught because somehow it took me several minutes to see 25...♔g8 26 ♕e8+.

26 ♖f1+ ♗f6 27 ♖xf6+!

The less accurate 27 ♗g5 ♕f7 gives me some chances.

27...gxf6 28 ♕xf6+ ♔g8 29 ♖b3!

I hadn't foreseen this move, but it wouldn't have helped me if I had.

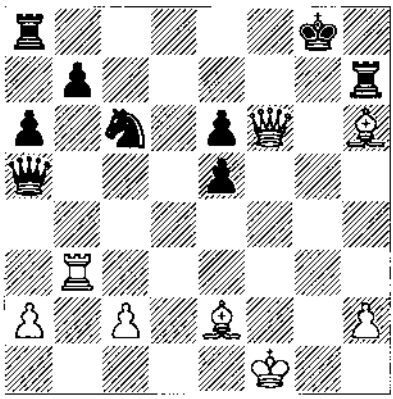
29...♖h7

I had a glimpse of hope when I saw 29...e4 30 ♖g3+ ♕xg3+ 31 hxg3 ♖h1+ 32 ♗f1 ♖f8, seemingly winning the f1-bishop. However, White can block the f-file: 33 ♕xe6+ ♖f7 34 ♗f4!.

30 ♗h6!

An instructive detail: White takes yet another move to prepare the hammer-blow.

30...♕a5+ 31 ♔f1 *(D)*



1-0

There is no defence to ♖g3+. Radjabov made full use of the advantages of the white pieces, with deep preparation combined with attacking prowess. I believe my only mistake was the plausible-looking 20...♗f7.

The Draw Bully

In addition to the advantage of having 'the initiative' there is the possibility for White to steer the game towards a draw. Many grandmasters feel that this is the principal advantage of being White. The basic point is that at a certain level, if White wants to draw, it is difficult for Black to avoid. Ivan Sokolov, who has been over 2700, even put it to me that if he is playing a 2450 who wants to draw, he can't really do anything about it (though I suspect he is being rather modest and perhaps unduly influenced by his classical repertoire 1 d4 d5 and 1 e4 e5). It is also possible for White to play for a win in relative safety, but often much riskier for Black to do so. So let's look at this drawing issue a bit more closely.

Kasparov has made the point that it is incumbent upon White to play for a win, while Black has no such obligation. Indeed, there was once a simultaneous display in which Kasparov refused to allow his opponent to take a threefold repetition with White! The subtext of this viewpoint is that it is not so difficult for White to make a draw and so if White plays for a draw it really kills chess. A related issue is that in positions where there is the possibility of a threefold repetition, White has an in-built advantage. The importance of this point occurred to me during the following game:

Pitcher – Rowson

Blackpool 2004

1 e4 d6 2 d4 ♘f6 3 ♘c3 c6

I normally play the Najdorf Sicilian against 1 e4 and I believe that once you can confidently play the Najdorf, no other opening quite compares. I make an exception to this when I feel that I am not playing very well in a tournament. In those cases I find that I sometimes need to play a completely different opening, usually one I don't know very well, in an attempt to force myself to concentrate, and, hopefully, heighten my sense of danger.

4 ♗e3 ♕b6 5 ♖b1 g6 6 ♕d2 ♗g7 7 ♘f3 ♗g4 8 ♗e2 d5!? 9 e5 ♘fd7 10 0-0 e6 11 ♖fe1 0-0

11...♗xf3!?.

12 b4?

12 ♘g5 ♗xe2 13 ♘xe2 c5 14 c3 ♕a6 15 a3 ♘c6 is equal.

12...♕d8 13 ♘g5 ♗xe2 14 ♘xe2 ♘b6 15 ♕d3 ♘c4

I think Black has a large positional advantage here due to the c4 outpost and the option of three different pawn-breaks (...c5, ...a5 and ...f6), with which he can take his time because White is not really threatening anything. Or so I

thought. I must admit that I lost my sense of danger here. This was partly because I was playing someone rated 400 points below me, but also because I saw that f4-f5 wasn't coming for several months and there didn't seem to be any other dangerous ideas in the position.

16 ♗c1 a5??

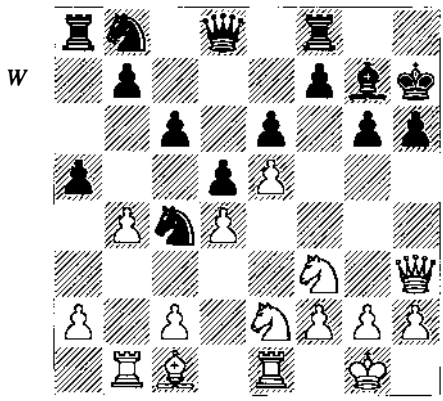
I played this more or less immediately, wanting to make my opponent lose time over whether to play b5 or a3. However, he has a third move, which is rather dangerous.

I should have played 16...h6! 17 ♘f3 ♘d7, which is very comfortable for Black.

17 ♕h3!

Oops! From an objective point of view I now had to give my opponent the option of taking a draw if I wanted to survive.

17...h6 18 ♘f3 ♔h7! *(D)*



The exclamation mark is for the correctness of this move, plus the bluffing factor. I had no intention of taking a draw here. Even though the position on the board demanded it, my position in the tournament demanded otherwise because I had already dropped a half-point in a five-round tournament and had yet to play my main rivals. This was a curious moment for me because after 17 ♕h3 it feels like White is better, but after 18...♔h7 I doubt if he has more than a draw because White's initiative on the kingside is balanced by his damaged queenside. However, it occurred to me that having this option of forcing a draw was some sort of advantage, because it might have forced me to play some inferior moves.

19 g4?

He should definitely have played the repetition 19 ♘g5+ ♔g8 20 ♘f3 at least once. He loses nothing and forces me to disclose my intentions. Here I would have had to try 20...♘d7 21 ♗xh6 ♖e8, when I feel that Black is significantly worse, but all results are possible because White's queenside is such a mess. After 22 ♘g5 (22 ♗xg7 and 22 b5 are also possible) 22...♘f8 my opponent will still have to play some good moves to win the game. With all due respect to my opponent, this was a risk I was willing to take in the circumstances.

My opponent's decision to play on was brave, but he did it in an impractical way. With a bit more practical insight, he could have achieved a much better position by repeating once and making me reveal my (somewhat dubious) intentions. After this moment passed, I gradually assumed the upper hand, and took control with a sweet combination.

19...♖h8! 20 b5 c5 21 ♗xh6 ♗xh6 22 g5 ♔g7 23 ♕g4 ♘d7

I saw the possibility 23...♗xg5!? 24 ♘xg5 ♘d2 25 ♘xf7!? ♕h4!, and didn't see an answer for White, but it just felt too risky to instigate play without two of my pieces!

24 gxh6+ ♖xh6 25 c3 ♕e7 26 ♘f4 ♖ah8 27 h4 cxd4 28 cxd4 ♖xh4! 29 ♘xh4 ♕xh4!

28...♖xh4 felt right, but for a while I felt cheated by the absence of a continuation after 29 ♘xh4 ♖xh4 30 ♕g3. However, I have found it is good to 'follow your hunch' as far as possible, and in this case it revealed that while 29...♖xh4 is not convincing, and I don't want to exchange queens from a general point of view, I am actually winning material by force.

30 ♕xh4 ♖xh4 31 ♘e2

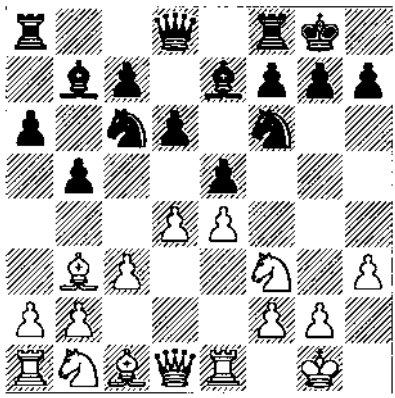
31 ♘g2 ♖xd4 32 f4 ♖d2 followed by ...g5 is winning for Black.

31...♘d2! 32 ♖b3 ♖g4+! 33 ♔h1 ♘xb3 34 axb3 ♖e4 35 ♔g2 ♘b6 36 ♔f1 a4 37 bxa4 ♘xa4 38 ♖c1 ♘b2 39 f4 ♘d3! 40 ♖d1 ♘xf4 41 ♘xf4 ♖xf4+ 42 ♔e2 ♖h4 0-1

This game made me reflect on the issue of threefold repetitions more generally, and one of the better known examples in particular:

1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 ♗b5 a6 4 ♗a4 ♘f6 5 0-0 ♗e7 6 ♖e1 b5 7 ♗b3 d6 8 c3 0-0 9 h3 ♗b7 10 d4 ♖e8 11 ♘g5! ♖f8 12 ♘f3! *(D)*

B



This is a difficult moment for Black! If he plays 12...♖e8, as he probably wants to, he allows White to force a draw with 13 ♘g5 ♖f8 and then 14 ♘f3 is already a threefold repetition before Black has time to deviate. For White the situation is completely different! He can flick in the first ♘g5 with absolutely no intention of taking the draw but perhaps with a reasonable chance that Black will deviate in order to avoid a draw. In that case he won't have to show how difficult it is to get an advantage against the Zaitsev!

This is especially useful because none of the alternatives for Black at this juncture are particularly attractive, mainly because unlike the Zaitsev, most of them allow White to achieve the manoeuvre ♘bd2-f1 without any complications. **Therefore, I believe White should repeat the position once at this juncture, regardless of whether he wants to draw or not. Raising the possibility of a draw might lead Black to deviate, and this seems to increase White's winning chances!**

12...♖e8

12...♘d7 13 ♘bd2 ♗f6 14 ♘f1 ♖e8 15 ♘1h2 ♘a5 16 ♗c2 exd4 17 cxd4 c5 18 ♘g4 cxd4 19 ♘xd4 ♗xd4 20 ♕xd4 ♖c8 21 ♕d1! was Bauer-Fressinet, Belfort 2003, when White was clearly better.

12...♕d7 13 ♘bd2 ♖ad8 14 ♘f1 is a standard Lopez advantage.

12...♘a5 13 ♗c2 ♘c4 14 b3 ♘b6 15 ♘bd2 ♖e8 16 ♘f1 ♗f8 17 ♘g3. Again, White has a typical Lopez edge: he has more space in the centre, and good control of it too.

12...exd4 13 cxd4 d5 (13...♘a5 14 ♗c2 c5 15 d5 is like a good Benoni for White) 14 e5 ♘e4 15 ♘c3 ♘a5 16 ♗c2 f5 17 exf6 ♗xf6 18 ♘xe4 dxe4 19 ♗xe4 ♗xe4 20 ♖xe4 c5 21 ♖g4 cxd4 22 ♗g5 is also better for White.

13 ♘g5 ♖f8 14 ♘f3 ½-½

For the record, this position is dear to me because it allowed me to make my final GM norm at the Scottish Championship in Edinburgh in 1999.

Conclusions:

1) The advantage of the first move has some similarities with the serve in tennis in that White can score an 'ace' (for instance with a powerful opening novelty), he has more control over the pace and direction of the game, and he has a 'second serve' in that when things go wrong his position is not usually losing.

2) White begins the game with some initiative, but this is a psychological advantage rather than a positional advantage and whether it leads to a positional advantage depends on the relative skill of the players.

3) In the hands of some players, the initiative can be used to play a kind of powerful 'serve and volley' chess in which Black is flattened with a mixture of deep preparation and attacking prowess.

4) If White wants to draw, it is often not so easy for Black to prevent this. This advantage is particularly acute in cases where there is a possible threefold repetition, because White can begin the repetition without committing to a draw and Black has to decide whether to deviate before he knows whether White is bluffing.

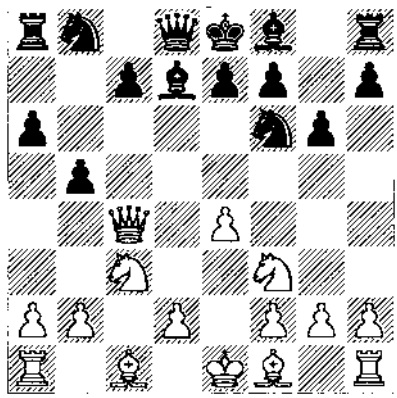
13 Black's Advantage

The soft overcomes the hard; the gentle overcomes the rigid. Everyone knows this is true, but few can put it into practice.
LAO TZU

Given that White begins the game with certain obvious advantages, whatever advantages Black might begin the game with must be relatively subtle, if they exist at all. Nonetheless, I do believe that there are certain advantages to playing with Black, and certain ways of playing that make it more likely for these advantages to become relevant. In short, Black's advantage arises from the expectations that White's advantage creates, and also from a deep understanding of the limitations of the initiative.

Conquest – Rowson
Torshavn 2000

1 ♘f3 ♘f6 2 c4 g6 3 ♘c3 d5 4 ♕a4+ ♗d7 5 ♕b3 dxc4 6 ♕xc4 a6 7 e4 b5 *(D)*



8 ♕e2!

This move came as a surprise (I only knew that 8 ♕b3?! c5! is comfortable for Black) but it had been played a few times before this game with devastating effect and I should really have known about it. White threatens all sorts of nasty tricks with e5 and ♘g5, with ♕f3 or e6 to follow. This is quite a good example of 'the initiative' in action. White is 'doing things' here. He is creating threats, and Black does not seem to be fully ready to deal with what is coming his way. However, the following shows why we shouldn't be unduly afraid of the initiative and how accurate play can absorb it.

8...♗c8!!

A powerful and paradoxical move. It is powerful because it takes the sting out of White's idea of playing e5, increases the queen's control over d4 and increases Black's options (e.g., ...♗b7 and ...♗g4 are both possible). The move is paradoxical because Black's problems seemed to stem from his lack of development, and superficially this retreat to the back rank just makes them worse. However, the move is a good illustration of the kind of thinking Black needs to keep the initiative under control.

8 ♕e2 is a very tricky move, but it is also artificial, and compromises the coordination of White's position considerably. This means that if White cannot use his current configuration to make something of his initiative, he will need to take time to reorganize his position, and during that time Black will catch up in development and start causing problems.

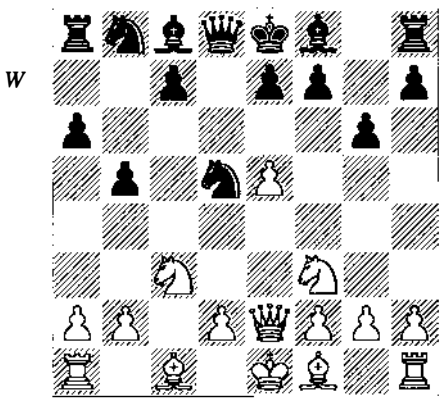
Moreover, 8...♗c8 is not as difficult to find as you might think. If you look at the position without prejudice, you find that it arises from the needs of the position. Black definitely needs to meet e5 with ...♘d5; otherwise he will be pushed back and lose coordination. Playing ...e6 or ...c6 uses precious time and further weakens the black position. Therefore, in order to make ...♘d5 possible, the bishop needs to move from d7. Where should it go? If it goes to c6 the c-pawn is hampered and the b8-knight grumbles: after 8...♗c6 9 a3 ♗g7 10 d4 White

is very comfortable. If it goes to e6, Black will have to lose further time and move the bishop again to avoid being rolled over in the centre: 8...♗e6 9 d4 ♗c4 10 ♕c2 ♗xf1 11 ♔xf1 is much better for White; g3 and ♔g2 will follow and White's centre is strong while Black's queenside is weak. If the bishop goes to g4 there is a more immediate problem: 8...♗g4 9 e5 ♘d5 10 ♕e4! ♗xf3 11 ♕xf3 e6 12 ♘xd5 ♕xd5 13 ♕xd5 exd5 14 d4 with a comfortable edge in the ending. Therefore, as Sherlock Holmes once put it: once you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. Hence 8...♗c8!!.

9 e5

After 9 d4 ♗g7 Black can carry on with his kingside development and decide what to do with his c8-bishop in the future.

9...♘d5 *(D)*



10 ♘g5

10 d4 ♗g7 looks fine for Black because I will be able to castle safely and counterattack in the centre with ...c5 or ...f6.

10...e6

Necessary to support the knight on d5.

11 d4 ♗e7!

Gaining some time to catch up in development. In general the bishop would rather be on g7, but given that White's queen is on e2, I felt that both sides will probably have to rearrange their forces at a later stage and that the priority at this stage was to make the g5-knight declare its intentions.

12 h4!

A worthwhile move, more or less forcing me to have a weak pawn on h6. 12 ♘f3 ♗b7 13 ♗h6 ♘d7 with ...c5 to follow looks comfortable for Black.

12...h6 13 ♘f3

13 ♘ge4 ♗b7 (13...♘c6!?) 14 g3 ♘d7 15 ♗g2 c5 16 dxc5 ♘xc3 17 bxc3 ♘xc5 18 0-0 ♘xe4 19 ♗xe4 ♗xe4 20 ♕xe4 ♖c8 and now Black's structural advantage is balanced by his lag in development and the fact that he has to lose further time in order to connect his rooks (e.g. with ...♔f8-g7).

13...♗b7 14 g3 c5!

The simplest solution. 14...♘xc3 15 bxc3 ♕d5 and 14...♘d7 15 ♗g2 ♘xc3 16 bxc3 ♘b6 are also possible, but less clear-cut because White's centre remains relatively firm. After 14...c5 the following sequence is almost forced and Black emerges with a slight edge.

15 dxc5 ♘xc3 16 bxc3 ♘d7 17 ♗g2 ♘xc5 18 0-0 ♕d3

I was very satisfied with the way the game had gone, and wanted to end the tournament with a positive feeling so I offered a draw. However, I underestimated my position a little, and could perhaps have played on, though after 19 ♕xd3 ♘xd3 20 a4! the position is drawish in any case.

½-½

I like the move 8...♗c8!! because it maximizes the potential in Black's position, and by doing so it absorbs the white initiative. We shall look at the role of 'potential' in more detail later in this chapter, when we revisit some of Mihai Suba's ideas from *Dynamic Chess Strategy*. Suba's ideas are subtle, which is appropriate given that, as I've said, Black's advantages are subtle too. However, to set the scene for Suba's ideas about playing Black, we need to begin by considering the ideas of another chess theorist, Andras Adorjan.

Is Adorjan OK?

Adorjan is often considered to be a bit of a maverick, but his contention that 'Black is OK!' is one of the most important chess ideas of the last

two decades. It is an important idea because it has shaken our assumption that White begins the game with some advantage, and revealed its ideological nature (see Chapter 11). I should make it clear immediately that I don't agree with much of what Adorjan says, and I often don't like the way he says it, but any discussion of 'Black's advantage' in chess would feel empty without some consideration of Adorjan, and what he has been trying to impress upon a bemused chess world for most of his life.

My overall feeling is that Adorjan's writings shed more heat than light on the issue of the first-move advantage. The heat is important, because it makes ideological claims uncomfortable, and encourages players to question the assumption that White is better. **However, I have always felt that a simple point knocks the steam out of Adorjan's ideas: 'White is better' and 'Black is OK' need not be mutually exclusive claims.** We only begin to shed light on the first-move issue when we look more closely at what it means (if anything) to say that White is 'better' and in what sorts of ways Black can ensure that he is 'OK'.

Adorjan's books and articles are freely available, so rather than repeat all of his ideas I have selected only the most compelling points, and those that seem to be worth developing:

1) *One of Black's advantages is that White has a certain responsibility to play for a win. In most cases, after the pieces have been developed, White is the first one to try to do something. Some players don't like this, and are not so good at it.*

This strikes me as true, and I know that in my own case there are certain players I would rather play as Black, because they take the responsibility of 'White's advantage' seriously and often make mistakes as a result. However, this point has limited applicability because in my experience most players are itching to 'do something' with both colours (see Chapter 8)!

2) *Neither side should be trying to 'equalize' from the starting position because the starting position is equal.*

This is a conflation of 'drawn' and 'equal' based on a failure to distinguish between theory and hyper-theory. We do not know for a fact that the starting position is drawn, but it does seem like a safe assumption from a hypertheoretical point of view. However, it is something entirely different to say that the position is 'equal' because this is a theoretical assessment, not a 'hypertheoretical' one. The alternative to the position being drawn is that it is winning for White or winning for Black, but the alternative to it being equal is that it is a bit better for White or for Black. That said, I agree that the idea of Black trying to 'equalize' is questionable. I think that it has limited application to a few openings, rather than being an opening prescription for Black in general.

3) *In many opening books, where an assessment is given as equal, if you look closely you find that Black is already better.*

I am not sure about this, and I certainly don't agree with the extent to which Adorjan seems to think it is true. However, there is some similarity between this point and what I say about 'the plusequs' in Chapter 11. 'Chess ideology' does affect the assessments given in opening books.

4) *Adorjan quotes Lajos Portisch as saying that about two-thirds of chess openings are disadvantageous for Black. So there is the remaining one-third, and all Black has to do is play these openings and defences, and then he has nothing to fear.*

I don't know exactly what Portisch said, but this strikes me as an important point. I was recently chatting to Michael Adams about the various problems with 1 e4 and why I chose to switch, for now, to 1 d4 in most games. He agreed that there were problems, particularly in certain Sicilian lines, but seemed to accept this as normal and added with typical wit: "Well, you can't play against the Pirc every day." No offence is intended to Pirc players, but you have probably noticed that it is rarely played at the very highest levels. At my level it is still a viable opening, but I think the elite players consider it too generous to White.

Part of the problem with Black's 'image' (though Black does not have nearly as bad an image problem as Adorjan seems to think) is that it is based on the whole spectrum of openings, many of which simply don't cut the mustard. For some, like the Pirc, this is true at only the very highest levels, but for others, like the Latvian Gambit, this is more generally true.

More to the point, it is possible that the path may be even narrower than Portisch's comment suggests. I know that 1 d4 players struggle to get anywhere against main-line Slavs and 1 e4 players find the Najdorf and Sveshnikov Sicilians particularly tough. I am not saying that Black has to play these openings, but I do think that from a perspective somewhere in the twilight zone between theory and hypertheory, it might be that of the main-line openings we consider acceptable, some are better than others to a degree we haven't yet realized.

5) *People do not win too often with the black pieces because they do not even want to, and that's why White has a psychological advantage, although it could be turned around.*

This strikes me as an exaggeration, which, by his own admission, is not untypical for Adorjan. However, our pre-game attitude is definitely affected by the colour we are due to play with. This is partly based on experience, partly on an anticipation of the likely opening line, but I also think it is partly ideological. **I think if players thought about the game as a whole more than the first phase of the game, they might approach their black games more confidently.** This is why I think it is important to broaden your ability to play different kinds of positions and have a wider repertoire of mental attitudes. To do well with Black you need to be less dependent on the initiative and more comfortable with defending, counterattacking and endgame grinds.

6) *Counter-attacks tend to be stronger than attacks, because to generate an attack you usually have to weaken your position.*

This is too general a claim to have any force, but although it is conceptually in the clouds, there is some empirical dry land in the open Sicilians, as I argue in the final section of this chapter.

7) *The extra tempo can have some significance only if the position acquires a symmetric character. Even in those positions, it is not always the case! In a sharp position, however, where both players fight hard for the initiative, attack, or counterattack, colours are of no importance.*

The same point is made forcibly by Mihai Suba. They key to success with Black, where 'success' means more than making a draw, is to seek out asymmetrical positions where the 'extra half-move' doesn't make itself felt. I think Adorjan is also right that having an extra tempo in a symmetrical position is not always an advantage, as I suggest in Hodgson-Arkell below.

8) *White's only advantage is that he can avoid sharp play in any opening, exchange the pieces off, and if he does it well, he will have his draw all right.*

I disagree that this is White's only advantage, and I also think that it is a very significant advantage. As I argued in the last chapter, it an advantage that players can probably make more use of.

9) *If both players make good moves, they will inevitably reach an equal position. This is the point when 'old salts' call it a day and agree a draw – if they can. It is not always possible, as they have team-mates, team managers, spectators, etc., who all expect them to play for a win as White, saying that it is an advantage!*

I have seen many games lost through misunderstanding the idea that you have to play for a win because you are White. It is true, as I argued in the last chapter, that it is easier to steer the game towards certain kinds of positions as White, and that it is sometimes possible to win very directly with a kind of 'serve and volley approach', often based on theoretical preparation. However, this is only true *in theory*; it is up to you to show whether it is true on that particular day. Once the game begins you have to do your best to make the most of the white pieces, as your opponent has to do his best to make the

most of the black pieces. That said, when the game is under way, you have to look at the position in front of you for what it is. If you are better you are better, if it's unclear it is unclear, and if you are worse you are worse. All of these things matter and should affect your judgement of what to do. But what doesn't matter at all is whether you are White or Black. That matters at the beginning of the game, but it doesn't matter during it! **For instance if you are offered a draw and you find yourself thinking: "It's not so clear but I have to play on because I am White" then you are not being rational at all. Whatever difference being White made is no longer relevant.**

10) *Adorjan's results with Black are good because he put a lot of effort into his black openings.*

This is consonant with Vassilios Kotronias's view (personal communication 2004) that White's real advantage is much less than the statistics suggest simply because most players put more effort into their white openings than their black openings. Vassilios made the point that for most players it is more fun to look at their white openings because they tend to be looking at positions that are attractive for them, and they enjoy the prospect of playing these lines because there are often lots of ways that Black can very quickly land himself in trouble. On a related point, he added that there was also a kind of 'placebo effect' at work in that because people preferred playing White, they play better when they are White.

These two points both strike me as highly plausible, but I have no way of verifying them so I leave it to the reader to consider how much import to give them.

11) *Following on from his previous statement (above), Adorjan adds: "This is where Black's chance lies. If White does not realize that he has reached the point when he has to play carefully to keep the game balanced, the process of the 'disappearance' of his 'advantage' may become irreversible in a couple of moves. A chess game is never in perfect equilibrium, except for obviously drawn positions. It is more like a seesaw in continuous motion. Perhaps this is what they call dynamic equilibrium, and this may well be the basis of the popular wisdom that once Black has equalized, he is already better. This means that, although the game is still balanced, the pendulum swings in the direction White has pushed it in. If White fails to stop the pendulum, Black obviously takes over the initiative, which may not mean too much in the strict sense of the word (that is, on the board), but it has important psychological implications. (This is the difference between human beings and computers.)"*

The statement that "a chess game is never in perfect equilibrium, except for obviously drawn positions" is an important one, and the pendulum analogy reminds me of a conversation I recently had with Paul Motwani. Paul had been re-reading my chapter on *Blinking* in *7DCS* and was particularly interested in the end of the chapter where I suggest that we should consider having a system of assessment that takes trends or the 'direction' of a position into account. For instance, I noticed that in many chess positions White seems to be slightly better, doesn't make any mistakes from a human perspective, and then seems to be slightly worse.

Those with a logical cast of mind rebel against this idea and suggest that all that this means is that the initial assessment was mistaken. However, this is another example of where the distinction between theory and hypertheory (Chapter 11) is helpful. 'Theory' is based on our concepts and limited understanding. It is a tool to help us think, and make assessments that tell us what to feel about a position. An assessment of 'slightly better' can therefore change from one side to another without the implication that the initial assessment was 'wrong'. The role of the initial assessment was not to be right or wrong in any absolute sense, but to make a good guess. It is the role of theory to make assessments that are as *accurate* as possible, but we can only be *precise* from a hypertheoretical perspective. The distinction between accurate and precise is a subtle one, but crucial to thinking about different kinds of advantages. What '±' means is: the position is probably a draw with best

play but the margin for error is smaller for Black. Then as the position develops and it seems that neither side has made a mistake you can give an assessment of '∓' meaning: 'Not sure why, but my impression is now that the position should probably still be drawn with best play but Black's margin for error has widened while White's has narrowed.' Please note that the 'probably' is not optional, or a sign of weakness. It is an admission that theoretical assessments are informed guesses rather than statements of fact. They cannot be statements of fact at most stages of the game, because we cannot exhaust the possibilities of a position and reach a definitive result. And unless we can do that we are operating in the realm of varying degrees of accuracy rather than analytical precision.

It is not the job of our assessments to give us the final answer. That is the job of 'hypertheory', who comes in with his much heavier tools to tell us who is winning, or that the position is drawn, but nothing in between. If you like, you can ask him for a printout of his analysis to prove his claim, but it might take you a while to read. If instead you ask him not for a final verdict but for an assessment of who is better and by how much, your question wouldn't make sense to him at all.

So our theoretical assessment tools like '±' are necessarily tentative, which brings me back to my conversation with Paul Motwani. Paul has a background in mathematics and was intrigued by the issue of how to make assessments that are better approximations, taking into account the position at hand and our sense of how it will develop. His proposal was to think of evaluations as functions and think of assessments in terms of graphs. Depending on what is being measured, some functions have local maxima or minima (high or low points relative to that area of the graph or point in the game) and global maxima and minima (the highest or lowest points in the graph or worst or best positions in the game) and some (like sine and cosine) have functions that keep undulating indefinitely. In any case, if a function reaches a local maximum, it might be the nature of the function to go back down but then up again (all relative to the mid-point which is 'equality').

However, it is important to note that this would just be another tool and that what is being measured is our assessment of the position rather than the 'reality'. The graph would reflect our subjective take on how the position was developing, but of course the background reality, hidden from view, is one of three results – winning for White, winning for Black or drawn. With our limited means, we can rarely be certain which of these is true of a given position.

A corollary of Paul's idea was his conviction that flexibility is really important – and especially for Black – because he starts off on the back foot and needs to be versatile and find a 'function' where he is not being forced further and further towards a global minimum. He also suggested that a key to playing well is sensing which function you are on, and how it is going, so that just before it reaches an unstoppable ascent or decline that you could 'jump off' just in time and start on a new function.

This is heady stuff, and to develop the idea fully we would need several examples with corresponding graphs. However, I think Paul is on to something very important for chess and I hope that somebody else finds time and space to develop the idea more fully than I can here.

'Zugzwang Lite'

If White's advantage is having 'the next move' then 'White's problem' is having to make it, and 'Black's advantage' lies in knowing what it is! In most cases we prefer to have the extra move, but the following two examples reveal that this is not always the case:

I find the following game particularly noteworthy because in general one would assume that whatever advantage White has would be revealed most clearly in symmetrical positions. I still think this is true in general, and the following may simply be 'the exception that proves the rule', but even so, there is something compelling about Black's strategy. He seems to be saying: 'I will copy all your good moves, and as

soon as you make a bad move, I won't copy you any more!'

Hodgson – Arkell
Newcastle 2001

1 c4

A subtle move. White takes control of the d5- and b5-squares but retains maximum flexibility for his centre pawns. If he is not provoked, White can enjoy ♘c3, g3, ♗g2 and only then decide where to develop his king's knight, and how to play the centre pawns. I mention this now because the defining feature of the English Opening seems to be its flexibility, and in this sense we can almost say that White seeks the advantages of Black and White: a gentle initiative and a set-up poised to react to information.

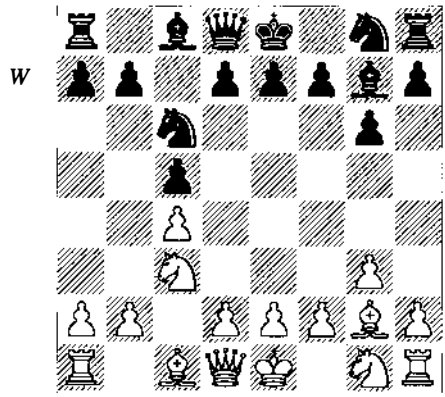
1...c5

After this sober move, it is hard to imagine either side coming under a kingside attack in the near future, and for this reason the Symmetrical English is often considered rather dull. However, chess contains multitudes, and tends to reward players who find interest where others find boredom. The game itself is only interesting once we engage with it and so to call a position dull is just to say that we have no interest in it. Such a point of view often says more about our own proclivity and limitations than the nature of the position itself. Hopefully some of the opening lines given below will show that even in such a 'dull' line, there is plenty of scope to play combatively.

2 g3

Hedgehog and Maroczy set-ups are still possible, but somewhat less likely after this move, so it is already possible that White is eschewing the critical line. 2 ♘f3 would scare me more if I played the Symmetrical English, because White intends to claim a space advantage after d4. However, Black has plenty of chances in those sorts of position too, because the positions will be asymmetrical, and he will have an extra centre pawn.

2...g6 3 ♗g2 ♗g7 4 ♘c3 ♘c6 *(D)*



5 a3!?

For a while this was considered the most dangerous move. Now it appears to be more spicy than strong, but it somehow remains 'trendy' long after it has gone out of fashion. White is trying to use the initiative to create immediate queenside pressure. Other possibilities include:

a) 5 ♘f3. Now:

a1) The main line begins with 5...♘f6, which is of course a perfectly playable move, but in some ways it's the type of compliance that gives Black a bad name in chess. I think you give away a lot when you give up control of d4. After 6 0-0 0-0 7 d4 White's first-move advantage seems to have been put to good use and he probably has some advantage because he will emerge with a useful amount of extra space.

a2) The line I like most for Black is 5...d6!? 6 0-0 ♕d7!?. I know this looks crazy, but it was played by no less than Bent Larsen and has the benefit of preparing ...b6 and ...♗b7 while retaining control of d4. It's not just a radical try to avoid a drawish position, it really does make it difficult for White to develop any sort of initiative and prepares to put the black pieces on challenging (for White) squares. Here is an idea of how things might develop: 7 a3 b6 8 ♖b1 ♗xc3!? (normally you wait for e3 before playing this, but it might be possible here too; note that after 8...♘h6 9 b4 ♘f5?, 10 b5 is a problem) 9 bxc3 (after 9 dxc3?! Black has some problems with his g8-knight, but there are lots of other things happening in the position too, not least the lack of a sensible pawn-break for White because b4 seriously weakens c4) 9...♗b7 10 d3. Now the position is very unbalanced, and the better player will win, or draw if he's unlucky.

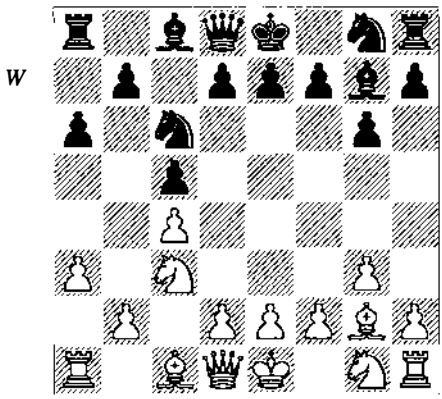
b) Another typical fifth move is 5 e3 but then I like 5...♗xc3!? even more. Now:

b1) On the face of it, 6 dxc3!? doesn't challenge Black at all, but a recent game suggests that White can cause some problems if Black is not careful. 6...d6 (6...b6!?) 7 e4!? ♕d7 8 ♘f3! ♘f6 9 ♕e2 ♕c7 10 h3 h6 11 ♘d2 and the idea of ♘f1-e3-d5 obliges ...e6 when Black will be rather weak on the dark squares (Kveinys-S.B.Hansen, Bundesliga 2000/1).

b2) After 6 bxc3!?, 6...f5!? is not an essential follow-up (6...b6!? is an alternative), but it was favoured by Miles and Larsen. 7 ♘e2 b6 8 h4 ♘f6 9 h5 ♔f7 10 d3 ♗b7 11 ♘g1 ♕c7 and the idea of ...♖ag8 and ...♔e8 (if necessary) gives Black pleasant prospects, but the position is quite tense, Kosten-Miles, British Ch (Hove) 1997.

c) Finally, if 5 d3, Black replies 5...♘f6!. The exclamation mark is just to emphasize that the previous drawback of this move (d4) no longer applies, but of course there's still a whole barrel of theory after this.

5...a6!? *(D)*



According to Keith, this is the most reliable equalizer. Black insists on copying White. He says: "I'll copy all of your good moves, and as soon as you play a bad move, I won't copy you any more!"

6 ♖b1 ♖b8 7 b4

7 ♕a4!? is a creative attempt. Black can't copy this one without losing – but perhaps the white queen is just misplaced on a4? 7...d6! (7...♕a5?? 8 ♗xc6 ♗xc3 9 dxc3 dxc6 10 ♕xa5 breaking the symmetry!) and now the lines are complex:

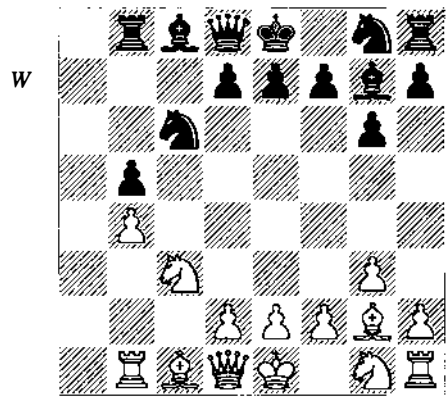
a) 8 ♗xc6+ bxc6 9 ♕xc6+ ♔f8 10 ♕a4 ♗xc3 (10...♗b7!? 11 f3 g5!? is also possible) 11 dxc3 ♗f5 12 ♖a1 ♕c8 13 f3 h5 gives Black good compensation.

b) 8 b4 ♗f5! 9 ♗xc6+ bxc6 10 ♕xc6+ ♗d7 11 ♕xa6 ♗xc3 12 dxc3 ♘f6 13 ♘f3 0-0 gives Black excellent long-term light-square compensation, while White has a misplaced queen and two extra pawns.

7...cxb4 8 axb4 b5 9 cxb5

9 c5 a5! is already quite good for Black; e.g., 10 ♗a3 axb4 11 ♗xb4 ♘h6! 12 ♘f3 0-0 13 0-0 ♘f5, Krasenkow-Kosten, Asti 1996.

9...axb5 *(D)*



Before proceeding, I ask for the reader's indulgence in what follows. This was a rapid game for a start, so both players were relying mainly on instinct. The main point of showing this game is to reveal that having the right to move is not always desirable, because the right to move is also the obligation to move and this is sometimes a pain, even when it's not a formal zugzwang. I am not saying that Black is better here, or even fully equal, but I would ask you to try to consider the following moves as if you had never heard that White might begin the game with some advantage.

Both sides want to push their d-pawn and play ♗f4/...♗f5, but White has to go first so Black gets to play ...d5 before White can play d4. This doesn't matter much, but it already points to the challenge that White faces here:

his most natural continuations allow Black to play the moves he wants to. I would therefore say that White is in 'Zugzwang Lite' and that he remains in this state for several moves.

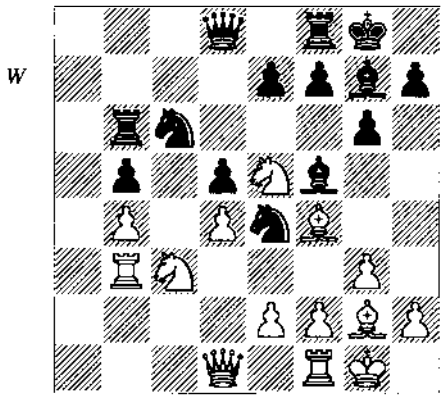
10 ♘f3 d5 11 d4 ♘f6 12 ♗f4 ♖b6 13 0-0 ♗f5 14 ♖b3 0-0

We have transposed into the 'pure' Symmetrical English. One would assume White's extra move is useful, but it's not obvious that it is. It seems a bit far-fetched to say that White is in a very mild form of zugzwang, but that's how it feels a few moves from now.

15 ♘e5

This looks fine, but Black can copy.

15...♘e4 *(D)*



Neither side wants to take either knight, but there is a limit to good waiting moves.

16 h3

16 ♘xc6 ♖xc6 17 ♘xb5 ♕b6 is very comfortable for Black, while after 16 ♘xe4 dxe4 17 ♘xc6 ♖xc6 Black has a slightly more active position.

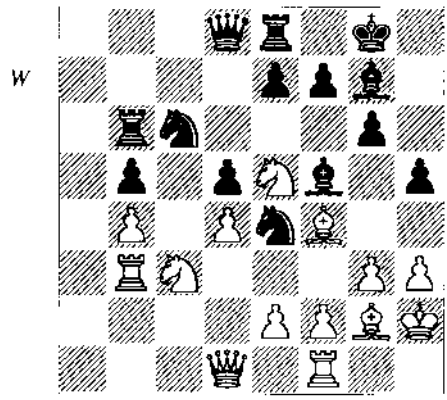
16...h5!?

Already something symbolic has happened. Black has slightly more space. But then I guess if instead White had played 16 h4 and Black 16...h6, I would probably be claiming that White had weakened g4!

17 ♔h2

Fair enough, White over-protects h3, but f2 is a bit weakened as a result. This may be a mistake. But after 17 ♖e1!? ♖e8! what should White do? The same problem persists: which of White's pieces can improve its position? 17 h4!? is not as silly as it looks, and makes it difficult for Black to keep the moral high ground. When I asked Kasimdzhanov about this position he joked that maybe White should try to triangulate with the king to give the extra-move problem to Black. However, we quickly established that after 17...♔h7 18 ♔h1 ♔h8 19 ♔h2 ♔h7 20 ♔g1 ♔g8 Black can keep the opposition, but only at the risk of allowing a draw by repetition!

17...♖e8! *(D)*



A good waiting move. In some lines e7 needs protecting and, as we see in the game, it is useful to have another unit covering e5. More to the point, White has to respond! He cannot copy with ♖e1 because f2 hangs – so what should he do? Julian didn't find anything very appealing, but I am not sure that there is anything there to be found. Of course White is not lost, and is probably not even worse, but he is under some psychological pressure, which is significant given that Black has done little more than copy his moves!

18 ♗e3?!

Now, with the symmetry well and truly abandoned, Black decides it is time to act:

18...♘xe5 19 dxe5 ♖c6!

Compare the pieces. It looks like Black has some initiative.

20 ♘xb5

The alternative 20 ♘xd5 ♗xe5 is at least equal for Black.

20...♗xe5!

20...♘xf2? loses to 21 ♕xd5!.

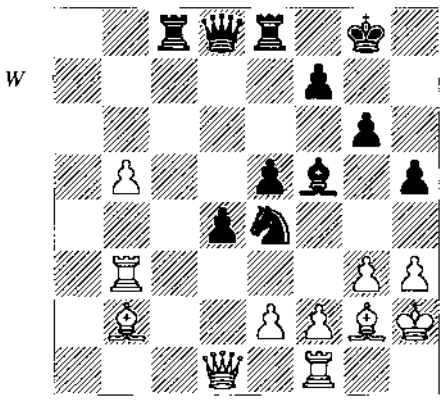
21 ♘d4 ♗xd4 22 ♗xd4 e5

Showing another point of ...♖e8. Now both sides have their trumps, but I think Black has some advantage, due to his extra central control, imposing knight and prospects for a kingside attack.

23 b5 ♖c8 24 ♗b2

24 ♗a1!? may have been more accurate, but that's almost impossible to tell during the game, especially given that ♗a3 might be a useful resource at some unforeseeable moment.

24...d4 *(D)*



White's position is certainly difficult to handle. Julian now fails to see Keith's threat, and his position falls apart.

25 b6?

25 e3?! ♘xg3 26 fxg3 ♗c2 27 ♕f3 ♗xb3 28 exd4 ♗c4! is winning for Black; 25 g4 hxg4 26 hxg4 loses to 26...♘xf2! with the idea of ...♗c2, while 25 ♕e1!? ♖c2! doesn't look too encouraging either. 25 f4 may actually be best but it looks a little risky and after 25...♘c3! 26 ♗xc3 dxc3 27 ♕xd8 ♖exd8 Black is better.

25...♘xf2! 26 ♕e1

26 ♖xf2 ♗c2.

26...♘e4 27 b7 ♖b8 28 g4 hxg4 29 hxg4 ♗e6 30 ♖b5 ♘f6! 31 ♖xf6 ♕xf6 32 ♕g3 ♗c4 33 g5 ♕h8+ 0-1

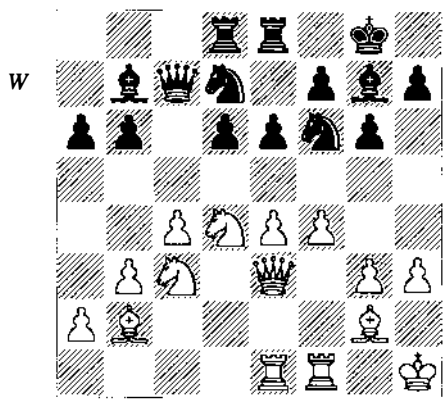
While this game was instructive in its own way, White didn't play the early middlegame particularly well. The following game is different, because to the uninitiated it looks like White does all the things he is supposed to. He gains space, places his pieces on good squares and appears to be ready for action, but then he quickly becomes worse.

Uhlmann – Suba

Bucharest 1979

1 c4 c5 2 ♘f3 ♘f6 3 ♘c3 e6 4 g3 b6 5 ♗g2 ♗b7 6 0-0 a6 7 d4 cxd4 8 ♕xd4 d6 9 e4 ♘bd7 10 ♕e3 ♗e7 11 ♘d4 ♕c7 12 b3 0-0 13 ♗b2 ♖fe8 14 ♔h1 ♗f8 15 f4 g6 16 ♖ae1 ♗g7 17 h3 ♖ad8 *(D)*

Suba comments: "There is nothing special about the opening moves. White's idea is clear – he wants to use his space advantage for an attack in the centre based on e5. Black usually reacts by playing ...e5 himself, but some games have shown that even then White retains the advantage ... I do not disagree with 17...e5 but, with my aversion to rigid structures and as it is not yet a necessity, I decided simply to strengthen my position and go on 'fishing'. There is a simple logic in this: if, as they say, White's set-up is ideal but he cannot reach his goal – e5 – then any move must worsen his 'ideal' set-up!"



Following on from the last chapter, this is a good example of what Suba means by losing the initiative "just like that". White appears to have done nothing wrong, he hasn't neglected any pieces and nor has he played passively or recklessly. Even so, he seems to have reached an impasse. The point of his position is to play e5, and if he cannot achieve that move, it is not easy for

him to do anything constructive. Black's position, on the other hand, has a huge amount of latent dynamic energy and is not focused on a single idea but on several. The main idea is to play ...e5, but Black can also try to make ...d5 and ...b5 work too. However, the strength of Black's position is its flexibility, and its capacity to react to White's ideas.

White's best bet now would be to realize that none of his immediate ideas can trouble Black, that he no longer has any initiative, and that he should, in a manner or speaking, 'change gears'. We don't normally play chess as if we were driving a car, but just as a driver has to speed up or slow down depending on other cars and road conditions, so chess-players need to adjust the rhythm of their thoughts during play as the position changes. In this case it means moving from a "building up for the attack" mindset (speeding up to overtake) to "regrouping to maintain the integrity of the position" (slowing down, observing carefully, changing direction) and, while doing so, knowing that this is just another phase in a potentially long game. There may well be other opportunities to attack (speed up) later in the game, but, just as with driving, you have to deal with what is immediately ahead of you.

I am not sure whether the driving analogy is a good one, but what is clear is that White's rapid and purposeful development has reached a dead end because the 'purpose' cannot be achieved. It is time for White to slow down and carefully regroup with a new purpose in mind: keeping Black's position at bay! Instead Uhlmann did what many players would do in his position. He carried on as if he still had the initiative, and thus lost control of the game.

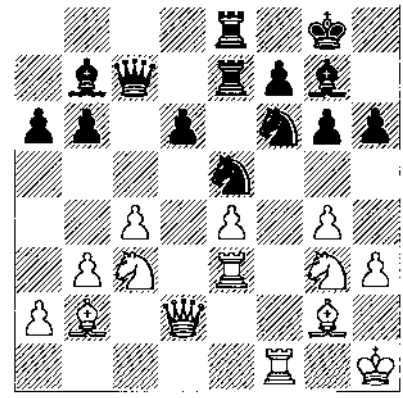
18 g4?

18 e5? is also bad: 18...dxe5 19 fxe5 ♘xe5.

Suba gives the line 18 ♘c2 ♘c5 19 b4 (this seems gratuitous) 19...♘cd7 20 e5 dxe5 21 fxe5 ♘xe5 22 ♕xe5 ♗xg2+ 23 ♔xg2 ♖d2+ 24 ♖f2 ♖xf2+ 25 ♔xf2 ♘g4+.

I think White should settle for putting this queen on a slightly better square, and being more ready for ...e5. After 18 ♕d2!? the position seems balanced.

18...e5! 19 fxe5 ♖xe5! 20 ♘de2 ♖de8 21 ♘g3 h6! 22 ♕d2 ♖5e7 23 ♖e3 ♘e5 *(D)*



"Somebody may raise the objection that I could have obtained the same results by playing 19...♘xe5 and that I had just lost some tempi. It's true that I lose some tempi but I forced White to use these tempi very badly by bringing the dominant knight from d4 to g3 where it is just about as active as the bishop on g2." – Suba.

24 ♗a3? ♖d7 25 ♖e2 ♖c8 26 ♖ef2 ♕d8 27 g5 hxg5 28 ♕xg5 ♘e8 29 ♕xd8 ♖dxd8 30 ♘a4 b5 31 ♘b6 ♖c7 32 cxb5 axb5 33 ♖d1 ♖c3 34 ♘f1 b4! 35 ♘a4 ♖d3 36 ♖xd3 ♘xd3 37 ♖d2 ♗a6 38 ♗b2 ♘xb2 39 ♘xb2 ♖c8 40 ♘d3 ♗c3 41 ♖d1 ♘f6 42 ♘f4 ♗e5 43 ♘d3 ♗xd3 44 ♖xd3 ♖c1 45 ♔g1 ♘h5 46 ♔f2 ♘f4 47 ♖d2 ♗c3 48 ♖xd6 0-1

Is Suba's Joke funny?

A lot of ink has been spilt in order to describe White's first-move advantage, the tempo up, the theoretical opening advantage, etc. The time of justice has come for Black, because he has his trumps as well, if only in the childish joke: "Say a number" "16" "OK, 17, I win!" In terms of mathematical game theory, chess is a game of complete information, and Black's information is always greater – by one move!

MIHAI SUBA

It is curious that when you break up the word 'information' you get 'in-formation'. In chess, information manifests in seeing the 'formation' of your opponent's position where the root of

'formation', 'form', refers not to playing form, but to structure (of which there are substructures, including pawn-structure, etc.). Our opponent's moves give us information about the *formation* that his position is *in*. An analogy might help to make sense of this:

In soccer, formations refer to the numbers of players in attack, defence and midfield. So, assuming the goalkeeper stays in goal, the remaining ten players can be, for example, 4-4-2 or 4-3-3 and within that sort of formation some midfielders may be more focused on defence, some on attack, etc. If you can look at ten players running around and see their 'form', you can take advantage of it, especially if that form is too rigid.

What was happening in Hodgson-Arkell above is that Keith was waiting to see the formation that Julian was going to adopt before deciding on his best reaction. It was only when Julian changed his formation with 18 ♗e3?! that Keith decided it was time to change his formation and release the tension. In Uhlmann-Suba White's formation gave Black a clear signal: don't let White play e5!

However, while information is important in chess, it is not totally clear to me what to make of Suba's reference to mathematical game theory in the quotation above. The point of the joke is a powerful one, but in the context of the joke the joke-teller has infinite flexibility about how to react to the information. In chess, on the other hand, our positions will always be in some sort of formation, so our reactive possibilities are limited. This makes sense of why Suba writes, also in *Dynamic Chess Strategy*: "Understanding and trusting dynamic structures, their hidden, undermining possibilities, offers the key to success with Black." This seems to be because "using an unbalanced set-up or an asymmetrical structure increases the opportunities for reaction". **Suba adds the following advice: "Make sure that all your moves really improve your dynamic potential, and that you cannot be forced into a regressive series without gaining suitable compensation."**

Making sense of what this all means is not easy. Suba's joke is funny, but it took me a while to realize that the emphasis on information is a bit misleading. Black can use information to his advantage, but only if his position has 'potential'.

Black's Potential

When we treat man as he is, we make him worse than he is; when we treat him as if he were what he potentially could be, we make him what he should be.
GOETHE

Black may have fractionally more 'information' than White near the beginning of the game, but to make any use of this he has to be sure that his position is flexible enough to react to the information he is given. Flexibility and reactive possibilities are captured by Suba's emphasis on **'potential'**. I feel that Suba's 'potential' is the key concept in terms of understanding how to deal with the initiative. My understanding of potential is that it is the latent power in your position. This power is harnessed by flexible structures and piece positioning, and expressed primarily in terms of effective reactions. We might be inclined to think of potential as non-existent because it is a relatively invisible feature of the position. In order to 'see' potential, you need to view the position from a dynamic perspective, by which I mean the position as it is likely to unfold concretely, rather than the way it looks in terms of the conventional categories that we normally use to look (structure, space, etc.). This requires a strong resistance to superficial judgements.

In Suba's own words: "I do not regard [potential] as a subjective creation, dependent on someone's 'odd moves'. It is objective. It exists in any position, and for each side. It deserves a scientific denomination. It is only its degree which is dependent on someone's play ... I know it is more nebulous than material count, pawn-structure or open lines, but we must be aware of it, because the future of chess strategy depends on it..."

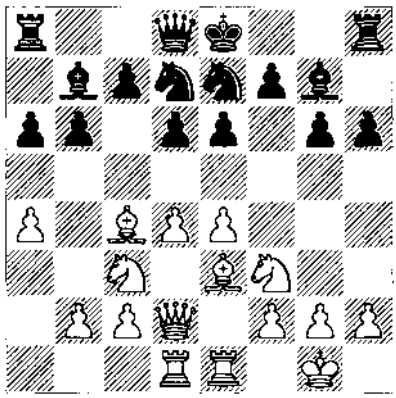
Personally, **I suspect one of the reasons we tend to overrate White's chances in chess is**

that we place more emphasis on the importance of the 'initiative' than 'potential'. This is partly because the initiative is more 'sexy' and gives rise to exciting ideas and games that can be understood at almost all levels of play, while 'potential' is a subtle idea that takes a discerning mind to appreciate. I believe this disparity is reflected in our approach to openings. Only recently have openings that favour potential over initiative started to be taken seriously. The Hedgehog has gradually earned respectability, but the Hedgehog's larger relative, the Hippopotamus, has only recently emerged from the swamp of unorthodox openings to sit at the table with the main lines. Outside of the Open Sicilian, the Hippo is perhaps the best illustration of the way Black can use 'potential' to keep White's advantage at bay. I don't have sufficient space to give full coverage of the Hippo here, but I feel compelled to give one example with minimal notes. For those who are curious to learn more about the Hippopotamus, I recommend Tiger Hillarp Persson's coverage in *Tiger's Modern* (2005).

Spoelman – Hort

Hoogeveen 2002

1 e4 g6 2 d4 d6 3 ♗e3 ♗g7 4 ♘c3 a6 5 a4 b6 6 ♕d2 ♗b7 7 ♗c4 ♘d7 8 ♘f3 e6 9 0-0 h6 10 ♖fe1 ♘e7 11 ♖ad1 *(D)*



Black has a quintessential 'Hippo' set-up whereby he 'lies in the mud' of his first three ranks like a hippo and waits to pounce on any intruders. The fact that Hort endorses the Hippo is revealing in itself, because in his prime Hort was one of the best players in the world, and understands chess very deeply.

White seems to have done everything by the book, and this is exactly the sort of position where 'The Plusequs' might appear, justifying his presence on the basis of White's extra space and the fact that it is not so easy for Black to castle. However, this assessment takes no account of the fact that Black's position is brimming with potential and that it will be able to absorb whatever White throws at it. I don't think White is at all better here, and in fact I would rather be Black. I feel there is more to look forward to (...c5 or perhaps ...f5) and the fact that Black can't castle is likely to provoke White into a premature attack.

In this particular game, Hort outrates his opponent quite heavily, so it is not surprising that the opening is made to look good. However, what is valuable is the way in which it is made to look good; I feel that Hort maximizes the potential in his position in such a way that White completely runs out of ideas. When White finally tries to 'do something' with 17 c4?!, it merely weakens his position, and Hort was in a good position to take advantage of it.

11...♔f8!?

Nonchalantly walking towards h7. Black could also have tried 11...g5, but in both cases he is comfortable. In any case, White needs to think highly creatively here to find a way to do something with his position. Instead he gradually runs out of ideas and Black slowly gains the upper hand.

12 ♗d3 ♔g8 13 ♘e2 ♘f6 14 ♘g3 ♕e8 15 ♕b4 a5 16 ♕a3 ♖d8 17 c4?! ♘d7 18 h4 ♘c6 19 ♗b1 ♘b4 20 b3 e5! 21 dxe5 dxe5 22 ♕c1 ♕e7 23 ♖d2 ♔h7 24 ♖ed1 ♘a6 25 ♘e2 ♘dc5 26 ♘c3 ♘xb3 27 ♖xd8 ♘xc1 28 ♖8d7 ♕e6 29 ♗xc1 ♗c6 30 ♖7d3 ♘b4 31 ♖3d2 ♕xc4 32 ♗b2 ♖e8 33 ♖c1 ♕e6 34 ♗a3 ♖e7 35 ♘d5 ♗xd5 36 exd5 ♕g4 37 d6 cxd6 38 ♖xd6 e4 39 ♘h2 ♕xh4 40 ♖xb6 ♗d4 0-1

This game gives another example of the role of 'potential' in playing with the black pieces in practice, but to make sense of what it means for White's alleged theoretical advantage we need

to look a bit more deeply. The next few paragraphs are necessarily abstract, and they won't be to everyone's taste, so please bear with me, or skip to the annotated game.

In light of the preceding discussion, one way to frame what is happening in the starting position, in very abstract and very selective terms, is that White begins the game with 'potential' and 'the initiative', while Black also has 'potential' and slightly more 'information' to compensate partly for the initiative.

I used to think that Black's chances lay in using the information against the initiative, without giving any thought to 'potential'. This was partly because I didn't take Suba's idea of 'potential' very seriously, and partly because I assumed that the potential of each position would cancel the other one out. Now I prefer to frame it differently. Just as the side with two bishops against bishop and knight shouldn't always trade the bishops because this might relinquish whatever added value that the bishop-pair gives him, so Black's combination of 'potential' plus 'information' can be used against White's combination of 'potential' plus 'initiative' in terms of one conceptual 'team' competing against another.

I concede that this is a highly selective way of looking at the situation, because White also gains information from Black's moves and in some openings (e.g. the Benko) Black has the initiative very early, so my point is not only very abstract but also very general. Nonetheless, I believe it is a useful way to frame the situation, and here is what it implies for what Black should be doing at the start of the game (using the terminology we have already considered in these last two chapters):

In order to deal with White's initiative, Black has to make sure that his position has plenty of potential. This allows him to react to whatever White tries to do with his initiative without compromising his position. In the process of reacting, he should try to use whatever 'information' White's moves are giving him. This involves trying to see through White's initiative to gauge the remaining potential in White's position. If you are still with me, and you have the stomach for one more abstract statement, **one of Black's aims in the opening should be to maximize potential so that he can make information more important than the initiative.**

This advice is a long way from the good old days of 'develop your pieces and control the centre' and I concede that this discussion is highly, even painfully abstract. Even so, I hope at least some readers will see why it might be useful to consider the first-move issue in these terms. For those who are not so sure, please realize that this abstract discussion is not about a set of tools to help you make good moves directly during play. Don't make the mistake of looking for 'the initiative' or 'potential' during play. These notions are far too abstract for that. Their role is to inform theory, and whatever role they have in practice is, at the most, indirect.

In any case, if such lofty theoretical ideas leave you feeling at sea, the following practical example should function as some welcome dry land.

Hamdouchi – Rowson

French League 2005

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 d6 3 d4 ♘f6 4 ♘c3 cxd4 5 ♘xd4 a6 6 ♗e3 ♘g4 7 ♗c1 ♘f6

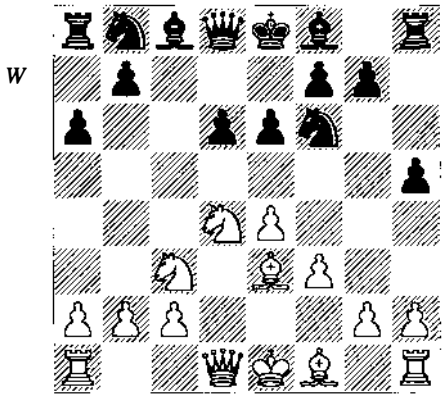
A little bit of 'draw flirting' never did anybody any harm, but as I mentioned in the last chapter, it makes sense for White to do this, because he has a little more flirting leeway than Black.

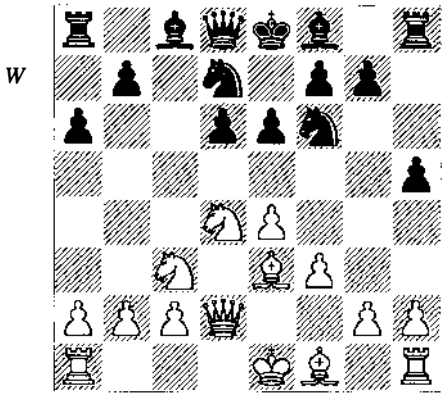
8 f3 e6 9 ♗e3

It would be quite gratifying if White started to play 9 g4!? as a way of avoiding ...h5! However, Black has ways to avoid a transposition to a main-line English Attack here, which I shall keep to myself for now!

9...h5!? *(D)*

The main idea behind this move is to prevent g4, because without g4 White's position doesn't make much sense. In most cases he doesn't have time to make f4 work because he has already taken time over f3. The drawback is that Black's king no longer has a natural refuge, and this is a long-term problem that White, who can castle either side, does not have. However, Black hopes to develop all of his pieces except the h8-rook, which serves the function of





supporting the black h-pawn and also discouraging White from playing g4. In a sense I am already using the information White has given me with his eighth move to read the potential in White's position. White still has some initiative, because it is easier for him to cause problems, but my position has more potential, primarily due to my elastic central structure.

On a quick theoretical note, I believe this combination of ...e6 and ...h5 has an undeservedly bad reputation. This reputation is based on the game Khalifman-Van Wely, Wijk aan Zee 2002, where White won in crushing style, but only after Black had made some inaccuracies.

10 ♗c4

When I asked Peter Svidler's opinion of 9...h5 he said that it wasn't so bad and that White should just think of which lines of the Scheveningen would work best against an early ...h5. His first thought was that something with ♗c4 should be correct, and I suspect he is right. Although White lost this game, he was not always worse by any means.

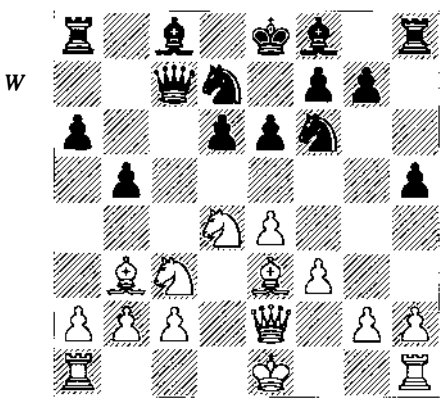
The continuation in the aforementioned Khalifman-Van Wely game was 10 ♕d2 ♘bd7 *(D)*.

The bottom line is that White needs a pawn-break to cause any trouble. This will either come from meeting an early ...b5 with a4 (but Black doesn't have to play ...b5), playing f4 and trying for e5 or f5 (but this seriously weakens e4) or insisting on g4 (but this either takes a long time or activates Black's rook and weakens the white centre).

a) In any case, playing in a timid manner with 11 ♗e2 does not threaten Black. I replied 11...b6!? (11...b5!? felt too ambitious at the time, but there is no direct refutation because Black is fine after 12 a4 b4 13 ♘a2 d5!) and had no problems after 12 0-0 ♗b7 13 a4 ♗e7 in Lahno-Rowson, Hastings Premier 2003/4.

b) 11 ♗c4 ♘e5 (11...b5 12 ♗xe6!) 12 ♗b3 b5 13 0-0-0 ♗b7 14 ♗g5 ♕a5 (14...♗e7 15 f4 ♘c4 16 ♗xc4 bxc4 17 e5 dxe5 18 fxe5 ♘g4 19 ♗f4 ♖b8 is given as unclear by Ftačnik, and I think that 14...♗e7 is certainly an improvement; however, I have the feeling that after 14 ♗g5 things are already looking promising for White, and that Black should look for improvements earlier) 15 ♔b1 ♘c4 16 ♗xc4 bxc4 17 ♖he1 ♖b8 18 ♘f5! exf5 19 e5! and White had a devastating attack in Khalifman-Van Wely, Wijk aan Zee 2002. After such an impressive and schematic display, it is hardly surprising that people were put off playing this system with Black.

10...♕c7 11 ♕e2 b5 12 ♗b3 ♘bd7 *(D)*



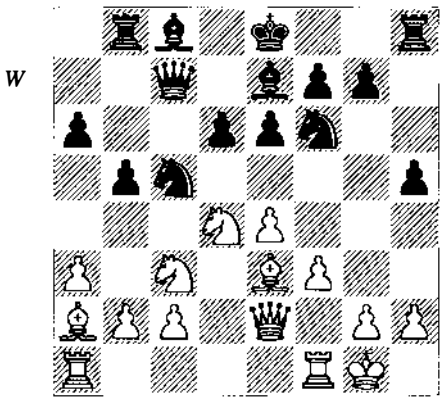
13 a3!?

White wants to preserve his strong light-squared bishop, even at the cost of losing some time. 13 a4 b4 14 ♘a2 looks too ambitious, but Black has to be alert. 14...♖b8 and 14...e5 both look fine. Something odd like 13 0-0 ♘c5 14 ♘d1!? is also worth considering – the whole variation is almost uncharted, which makes it fun to play for both sides.

13...♘c5

13...♘e5!? is less secure, because the knight doesn't cover the e4-pawn or the bishop on b3, but the threat of coming to c4, and sometimes taking back with the queen, means that this move might be an alternative if 13...♘c5 proves to be better for White.

14 ♗a2 ♗e7 15 0-0 ♖b8! *(D)*

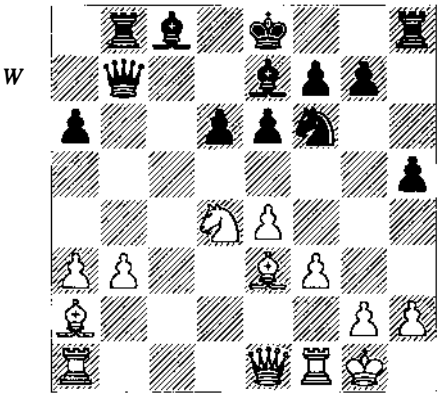


Maximizing potential. This is the most flexible move, containing the idea of ...b4 and ...♘a4. It is sensible to keep the bishop on c8 for a while because Black has no real intention of connecting rooks yet so ...♗d7 doesn't really improve the position, and takes away a square from the knights, while ...♗b7 weakens the e6-square and Black loses the important ...e5 and ...♗e6 resource.

16 ♕e1

16 b4!? ♘cd7 17 ♘d1!? ♘b6 18 ♘b2 e5 (18...♕c3 19 ♕d3! ♕xd3 20 cxd3 gives White some advantage) 19 ♘b3 (19 ♘f5 ♗xf5 20 exf5 ♘bd5! is fine for Black) 19...d5 looks OK for Black, but the position is tense.

16...♘a4 17 ♘xa4 bxa4 18 b4 axb3 19 cxb3 ♕b7 *(D)*



It's curious that Fritz evaluates this position as clearly better for White. My opponent, Hichem Hamdouchi, also thought he was better, but I just felt it was unclear. Although White has a nice pawn-majority on the queenside, I like the fact that I have a flexible central majority and that my h-pawn can be a nuisance for White. White has the initiative in the sense that he can 'do things' on the c-file and with his queenside majority, but White's ideas are not well concealed, and since my position has potential, I can deal with them.

20 b4 ♗d7 21 ♔h1?!

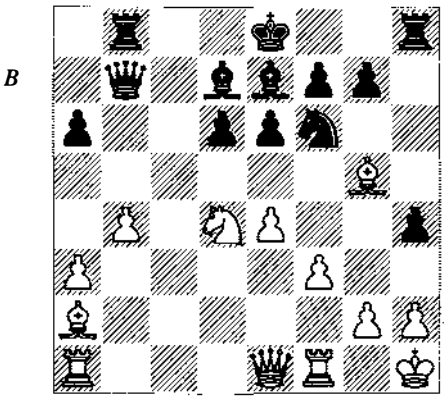
This looks a little casual. White can probably do better here:

a) 21 ♗f2!?, preventing ...h4, is more purposeful.

b) 21 ♕d2! h4 and now 22 h3! is a move that is normally a big structural concession because it fixes some dark-square weaknesses in White's position. However, in this case White's forces are much better coordinated, so it's not such a big problem. I think Black is OK but it's not so easy; e.g., 22...♘h5?! 23 ♖fc1 and Black needs to find an answer to the simple idea of ♖c2 and ♖ac1.

c) 21 ♘b3!? was proposed by Luke McShane as an improvement. The knight heads to a5 and tries to sideline the black queen. White can try to target the d6-pawn and force ...e5 or ...d5 before Black is ready for the commitment. I think Black has resources here, but he would have to think creatively to make the most of them.

21...h4! 22 ♗g5 *(D)*



In light of the way the game developed, it seems odd that White should encourage me to advance my h-pawn further. However, at this point it wasn't clear to either player whether the h3-pawn would become weak, and how Black would deal with the advance of White's g-pawn.

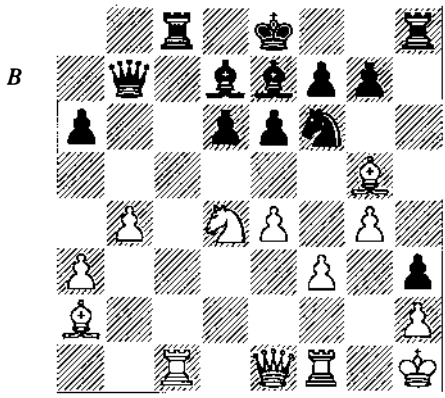
22...h3!

This is the obvious move, but it took me over ten minutes to play it because I noticed quite a forcing alternative: 22...♗b5!?. In the end I just couldn't bring myself to make such a strange move, and looking at the following lines was not very practical: 23 ♘xb5 (23 ♖f2 ♘xe4! and 23 ♖g1 ♘xe4! 24 ♗xe7? ♘g3+ were the tricks that attracted me to this line) 23...♕xb5 24 ♗xh4 (24 ♗e3 d5!? was my idea – it looks ambitious but White has no obvious refutation) 24...♘xe4!? 25 ♗xe7 ♕xf1+ 26 ♕xf1 ♘g3+ 27 ♔g1 ♘xf1 28 ♗g5 (in my analysis I considered 28 ♗xd6 ♖d8 29 ♗f4 ♘d2 and stopped here, being pleased to see 30 ♖d1? ♘xf3+; however, 30 ♔f2 looks good for White because my knight has no way out) 28...♘xh2 29 ♗f4 ♘xf3+ 30 gxf3. This line is only of academic interest, but I found it very difficult to reach an assessment of this position and think it would make quite a good starting-point for a training game.

23 g4

Now the position has stabilized somewhat and, on the face of it, White still has the initiative. However, at this point I felt that White's position had lost a lot of potential, while my position is still brimming with it. This makes it important to react well to the next few moves and wait for the initiative to exhaust itself. My king is a little unsure of his future, but he has options. However, the h3-pawn is a huge asset, and means that White's king will not feel safe until it is removed. Curiously, in the post-mortem Lev Aronian looked briefly at the position and commented on the h3-pawn: "It's a strong pawn! Did you start the game with the intention of moving your h-pawn to h3?"

23...♖c8 24 ♖c1 *(D)*



This makes sense, because the a1-rook wasn't doing anything.

24...♖xc1

A slight concession, because White wants to move his g5-bishop to free his g-pawn. However, 24...g6? 25 ♖xc8+ ♗xc8 26 e5 ♘xg4 27 ♗xe7 ♔xe7 28 exd6+ ♔f8 29 ♕c3 is good for White.

25 ♗xc1 g6!

Often a very important move in the Sicilian, maintaining the integrity of the pawn-structure by guarding against g5-g6. This also increases my reactive possibilities by covering the f5-square and making h5 more secure for my knight.

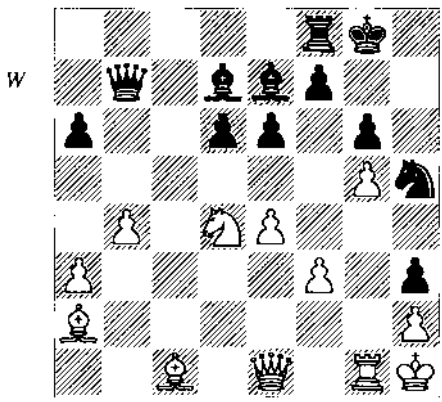
26 g5?!

There was no need to hurry with this, but I think my opponent already had a scheme in mind for his next few moves. After 26 ♗e3 the position is unclear, but I would always prefer Black due to the long-term asset of the h3-pawn.

26...♘h5 27 ♖g1?

Continuing with the same scheme. To be fair to Hichem, his idea makes a lot of sense: he wants to round up the h3-pawn with his queen and having the rook on g1 is useful for when Black plays ...e5 and White replies with ♘f5. However, there is a well-hidden nuance that renders the whole idea faulty. I had already seen the idea in general terms, but here I realized that it was the right moment to put it into practice.

27...0-0! *(D)*



The right moment to castle, because there is no other way to improve my position, and this increases my potential. Moreover, I had seen a really sweet reactive possibility if White continued to pursue his initiative.

28 ♕b4?

The position doesn't look great for Black because it seems the h3-pawn will be lost and I cannot play ...e5 without fatally compromising my king position. However, I had foreseen this, and my next move is crucially important. Although 28 ♕h4 looks right, it was in fact a mistake similar to 18 g4? in Uhlmann-Suba above. White should have realized that his initiative had shrunk, while my reactive possibilities had expanded. 28 ♗e3 is better, when the position remains tense.

28...♗d8!!

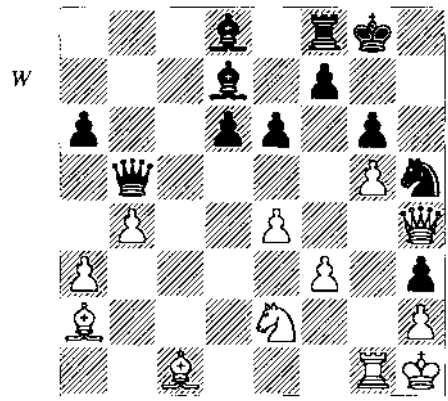
A powerful defensive move and the beginning of a counterattack. White is still OK but his attacking scheme has been scuppered and he needs to regroup. Hichem didn't manage to adjust in time. After 28...e5?! White can try to change the character of the position with 29 ♗d5 ♕c8 30 ♘f5!?.

29 ♘e2

The strength of the ...♗d8 idea can be seen in the line 29 ♕xh3 ♗b6! 30 ♗e3 ♗xd4 31 ♗xd4 e5, when there is no ♘f5 and White loses a piece for insufficient compensation.

29 ♗e3 ♗b6 30 ♕f2 is better, but White still has long-term problems with his king.

29...♕b5! *(D)*



As often happens when White overextends against the Sicilian, the hunter becomes the hunted. Black has managed to wrest the initiative away from White by keeping his position full of potential.

30 ♘f4?

30 ♕f2 ♗b6 31 ♗e3 was necessary, but Black is somewhat better after 31...♗xe3 32 ♕xe3 ♖c8 because his king is much safer and White is overextended.

30...♘xf4 31 ♕xf4?!

31 ♗xf4 ♕d3 32 ♕xh3 ♗b6 33 ♗b1 ♕xa3 34 ♖f1 ♗b5 35 ♖e1 ♕xb4 and Black is winning.

31...♕e2!

A decisive penetration. The queen arrives with tempo and the two bishops and rook will follow shortly.

32 ♗b3 ♗b6 33 ♗d1 ♕f2 34 ♕g3

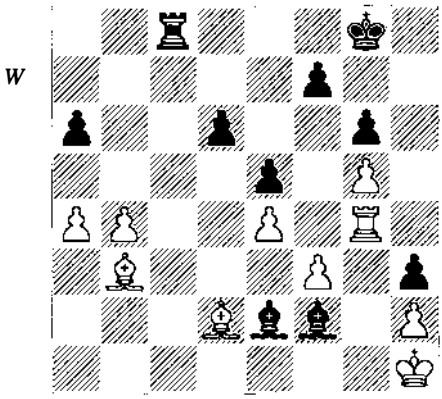
Now I could win slowly by taking the exchange, but after pausing to consider how I would play the ending, I realized that there is no need to take the material. The combination of the h3-pawn and b6-bishop keeps White's king

stuck in the corner and there is no way for any of his pieces to escape.

34...♖c8! 35 ♕xf2 ♗xf2 36 ♗d2 ♗b5! 37 a4 ♗d3 38 ♖g4 e5!

Even with two bishops and a rook, White can hardly move.

39 ♗b3 ♗e2 *(D)*



Now it all falls apart so White resigned. The final position deserves a diagram: the power of the h3-pawn is clear and we can see that the spaces left behind by White's attack are now filled by black pieces.

0-1

What's so Special about the Sicilian?

The previous game suggested that the initiative can't really get anywhere if you keep sufficient 'potential' in your position. However, optimizing potential is not so easy, and depends a lot on playing good openings. Regardless of the opening you play, you should keep the idea of potential in mind, but the Sicilian provides a particularly clear example of how to maximize potential, and to make White 'pay' for his initiative.

1 e4 c5

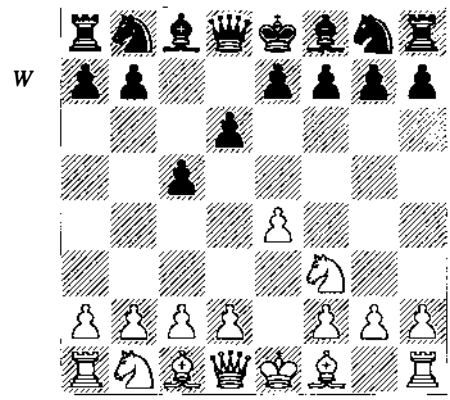
We tend to take the Sicilian for granted these days, rattle off a well-worn sequence of moves in our favourite sharp main line or trusted sideline and then 'look up' around move 10 or 15 and start to think about what's going on. 1...c5 is so familiar and respected now that we rarely ask why it is played so often, and with such success. Indeed, most statistical surveys suggest that 1 d4 is the most successful first move for White, but only because 1...c5! scores so highly against 1 e4.

But what's the big deal? Far from being obviously compelling, the move actually looks a bit pointless. I mean, look at it: no pieces are developed with this move, and the pawn on c5 only controls d4 and b4. So far it's not particularly impressive, so why is it so hard for White to gain an advantage after this move?

To my mind there is quite a straightforward explanation. In order to profit from the initiative granted by the first move, White has to make use of his opportunity to do something before Black has an equal number of opportunities of his own. However, to do this, he has to make 'contact' with the black position. This first point of contact usually comes in the form of a pawn exchange, which leads to the opening of the position. If Black declines such an offer to open the position, White will usually gain a lot of space.

So the thought behind 1...c5 is this: "OK, I'll let you open the position, and develop your pieces aggressively, but at a price – you have to give me one of your centre pawns."

2 ♘f3 d6 *(D)*



The great Dane, Bent Larsen, is often misquoted as calling the Sicilian a 'cheap trap'. In fact he felt that White was the one trying to catch Black in a cheap trap, but at a large price –

that of an extra centre pawn. Here is the original statement taken from *How to Open a Chess Game*: "Almost everyone plays 3 d4. But isn't that a positional error? I am not joking. I like my centre pawns, and I like a d-pawn better than a c-pawn! I know that sometimes White sacrifices a knight on d5 or e6 and smashes Black before he can castle, but in those games where this has been done, haven't improvements always been found for Black afterward? Well then, isn't 3 d4 something like a cheap trap? I know it can be combined with purely strategic ideas, but I find it easier to discuss strategy when I have an extra centre pawn!"

I love this statement, especially the last line, which resonates with my own feelings about open Sicilians, which I have been playing with both colours for over ten years. As Black, I feel like I lag in development and have to be very careful for ten moves or so, but as White I feel a deeper sense of pressure, as if somehow my position is not fully sound. Indeed, it is largely because I stopped looking forward to playing against Sicilians that I have recently switched from 1 e4 to 1 d4.

The following game gives a distilled demonstration of Black's structural advantage in the Open Sicilian. This structural advantage often only begins to become relevant in the later stages of the game. For this reason, White should be careful about exchanging too many pieces in the Sicilian unless he gains things in return. I have annotated the game quite lightly because the position speaks for itself.

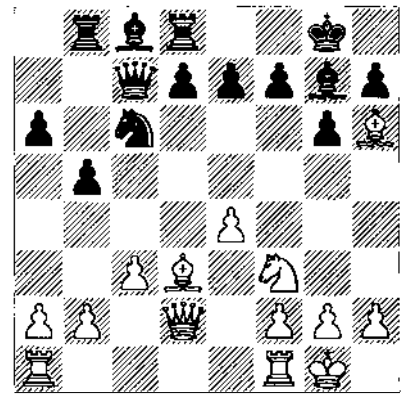
Luther – Zviagintsev

Essen 2002

1 e4 c5 2 ♘f3 g6 3 d4 ♗g7 4 dxc5 ♕a5+ 5 c3 ♕xc5 6 ♗e3 ♕c7 7 ♕d2 ♘f6 8 ♗d3 ♘g4 9 ♗g5 ♘c6 10 ♘a3 a6 11 ♘c4 b5 12 ♘e3 ♘xe3

The first exchange.

13 ♗xe3 ♖b8 14 ♗b6 0-0 15 0-0 ♖d8 *(D)*



Black seems to be contemplating playing ...d5 in one go.

16 ♗xg7 ♔xg7

The second exchange. Note that this brings the black king closer to the centre, which is sometimes useful for the ending.

17 ♗c2 ♖b6!?

An odd-looking move. I have the impression that Zviagintsev didn't feel like playing ...d6 yet, and I suspect he wanted to play ...♗b7 but didn't want his rook to lose contact with the b-pawn.

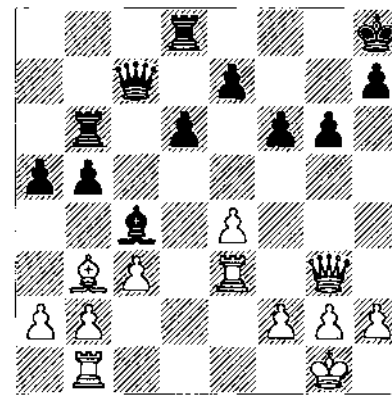
18 ♖ae1 d6 19 ♘d4 ♘a5 20 ♕g5 f6 21 ♕g3 ♘c4

Targeting White's soft spot on b2 and threatening ...♘d2. This is the type of way in which Black's structural superiority shows itself in the Sicilian – due to the half-open c-file White cannot play b3 to remove the knight from c4 without leaving his queenside very vulnerable. In this particular position there is also the threat of ...♘d2. White felt obliged to exchange another piece, after which he has no attacking chances and Black's structural advantage comes into its own.

22 ♘f5+ ♔h8 23 ♘e3 ♘xe3

The third exchange.

24 ♖xe3 ♗e6 25 ♗b3 ♗c4! 26 ♖b1 a5 *(D)*



Black's advantage begins to take hold.

27 ♕h4 ♖g8! 28 ♖a1 ♕c5 29 ♗c2 b4 30 ♗b3

Closing the position by 30 b3 ♗e6 31 c4 looks more solid but after 31...a4 Black's advantage is very secure and he can try to enter White's position via the a-file.

30...♗xb3 31 axb3 ♕e5!

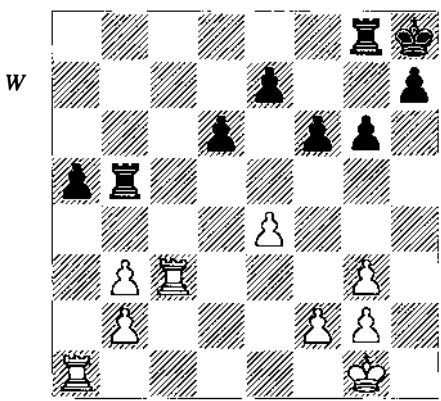
A simple move, centralizing the queen. White now felt obliged to make a further structural concession.

32 ♕g3 ♕xg3 33 hxg3?

Understandable, in that White gives his king some 'luft' and keeps his rook protecting the e-pawn. However, in view of the way the game develops, I am fairly sure this is a mistake. White ultimately loses this game due to the inflexibility of his kingside pawns and there was no need to make a further concession here. 33 ♖xg3 is better.

From here on I suspect that White should not be lost, but he faces an onerous defensive task.

33...bxc3 34 ♖xc3 ♖b5 *(D)*



Black has emerged with a significant edge in the double-rook ending. White faces immediate problems with his doubled b-pawns and longer-term problems with his doubled g-pawns.

35 ♖c7 ♖e8

This looks passive, but it is only temporary.

36 f3 ♔g7 37 ♖a3 ♔f7 38 ♖a7

38 g4 ♖eb8 39 ♖c3 might be an improvement, but Black is better in either case.

38...♖eb8 39 ♖7xa5 ♖xa5 40 ♖xa5 ♖xb3 41 ♖a2

This is a terribly passive move, but the alternative, 41 g4!? ♖xb2 42 g5, is not obviously better.

41...h5! 42 ♔f2 g5 43 ♔e2 g4

Tying down the king to the defence of the kingside. Given that he can't activate his king, sooner or later White will have to activate his rook and give up the b2-pawn.

44 ♔f2 ♔g6 45 ♖a7 ♖xb2+ 46 ♔f1 e5 47 ♖d7 ♖d2 48 ♖d8 f5 49 exf5+ ♔xf5 50 ♖h8 ♔g5 51 ♖g8+ ♔f6 52 ♖h8 e4! 53 fxe4 ♖d4 54 ♖h6+ ♔e5 55 ♖xh5+ ♔xe4 56 ♔e2 ♖a4 57 ♖g5 ♖a2+ 58 ♔d1 ♔d3 59 ♖d5+

This makes it quite easy, but it seems that Black might already be winning; e.g., 59 ♔e1 ♔e3! 60 ♔d1 ♖a4! keeps control.

59...♔e3 60 ♖xd6 ♖xg2 61 ♖e6+ ♔f3 62 ♖g6 ♖xg3 63 ♖f6+ ♔e3 0-1

Black wins after 64 ♖e6+ ♔f2 or 64 ♔e1 ♖g1+ 65 ♖f1 ♖xf1+ 66 ♔xf1 ♔f3 67 ♔g1 ♔g3.

Conclusion:

1) White's alleged advantage is also a kind of obligation to play for a win, and Black can often use this to his advantage.

2) White's 'extra move' can be a burden, and sometimes White finds himself in a mild form of zugzwang ('Zugzwang Lite').

3) White has the initiative at the beginning of the game, but as long as Black retains a flexible position with good reactive possibilities, this initiative can be absorbed and often passes over to Black.

4) Black's chances increase markedly by playing good openings. The best openings for Black tend to be those with lots of flexibility and latent potential, rather than those that give White fixed targets or that try to take the initiative prematurely.

5) The fact that White moves before Black often gives Black useful information, but he can only make use of this if his formation is flexible enough to find a suitable reaction.

6) White has 'the initiative', not 'the advantage'. Success with Black depends on seeing beyond the initiative and thinking of positions in terms of 'potential'.

14 Finally...

There has been a lot to think about in this book, and all this theorizing about chess has to be kept in its proper place. No doubt some of the ideas in this book will seep into your decisions over the board, but my aim is not to fill your head with heavy concepts that will confuse you during the game. My aim is rather to encourage you to have a wider repertoire of ideas about chess and chess improvement, so that you can become more aware of your habits of mind and reflect on these *away* from the board. This will help to develop your chess-playing skill over the board, because you will be able to see things you did not see before and think more productively without directly trying to. As I stated earlier in the book, your best chess will come when your mind is relatively quiet and clear and you can concentrate on the position in front of you with as little mental traffic as possible.

Almost every aspect of this book is contained in the following game. There was the experience of improvement in that I had previously struggled to beat my opponent with Black, despite frequently gaining the advantage out of the opening. There are 'psycho-logics' in terms of the mistaken assumptions that I made. There is storytelling in that the context of the game was uppermost in my mind (I had to win because I had already dropped a half-point in a five-round tournament) and I kept telling myself the story that I had good winning chances until my opponent resigned, even though I was objectively lost for several moves. There is a positive spin on the 'sacrificial attacker myth' in that I show that being subject to a myth is not always so bad, and there was concentration and flow in abundance. The game was difficult, and there was constant trading in the four dimensions. There was certainly more 'doing' than 'being', but my decision to sacrifice was based on deciding that I couldn't simply 'be' without becoming worse. Both sides had to defend creatively, but there was no place for 'glorious grinding' because the glory was elsewhere. The disparity between theory (in terms of what should have happened) and practice (in terms of what actually happened) could not have been clearer, and White did seem to emerge from the opening with some initiative, before I decided to take it from him by force. Finally, Black won!

This game is precious to me, and has probably given me more satisfaction than any other that I have played. It is not my 'best game' because it contains an abundance of mistakes and my opponent, though a seasoned grandmaster, is by no means the strongest player I have defeated. However, it was played in a joyously combative spirit and every minute of the experience was intensely enjoyable. If and when my life flashes before my eyes, I suspect this game will be part of that flash!

McNab – Rowson
Edinburgh 2002

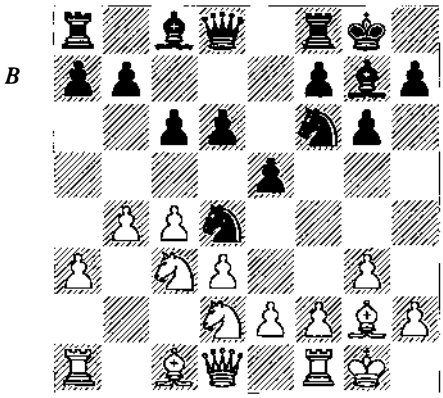
1 c4 e5 2 ♘c3 ♘f6 3 ♘f3 ♘c6 4 a3!? g6 5 g3 ♗g7 6 ♗g2 0-0 7 0-0 d6 8 d3 ♘d4!

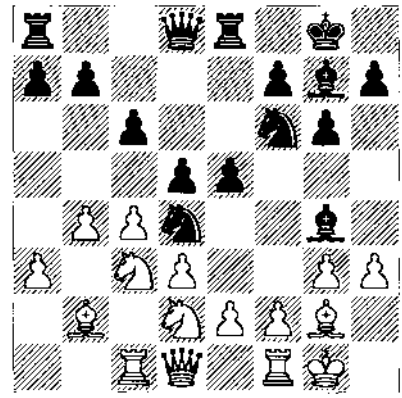
A strangely unprovoked hop on the face of it, but probably the best move. Black's piece formation does not lend itself to a quick attack. 8...h6 9 ♖b1 ♗e6 10 b4 ♕d7 11 b5 ♘e7 12 d4! was unpleasant for me in Hillarp Persson-Rowson, York 2000.

9 ♘d2 c6 10 b4 *(D)*

10...d5?!

Too ambitious. I had a cup of coffee soon after waking up but it was an unsatisfying instant brew so on the way to the game a few minutes later I couldn't resist a double espresso from the California Coffee House. Needless to say, I had a bit of 'red mist syndrome' at this stage. 10...♗e6 and 10...h5!? are more sensible moves, after which the position is fairly normal.





11 ♗b2 ♖e8 12 ♖c1!

Colin has played the opening well, and his position has lots of potential. I sensed that I might be a little worse already but I wasn't in the mood to 'equalize'. The first problem is finding a good place for my c8-bishop without making a structural concession.

12...♗g4

12...♗e6 13 e3 ♘f5 14 cxd5 ♘xd5 (14...cxd5 15 ♘b5!) looks playable for Black, given that ...♘xe3 and ...a5 are promising ideas, but somehow I was averse to playing normally in this game. After 15 ♘ce4 ♘dxe3 16 fxe3 ♘xe3 17 ♕e2 ♘xf1 18 ♖xf1 ♗d5 I guess Black is better, because ...a5 will generate some play, so White would probably prefer 15 ♕e2, when it looks about equal.

12...♗f5 13 e3 ♗xd3 (after 13...♘e6 14 e4 dxe4 15 dxe4 ♗g4 16 f3 ♗h5 17 g4 White will win material for a few checks and a few squares, but nothing very durable) 14 exd4 exd4 15 ♘cb1 ♗e2 16 ♕b3 dxc4 17 ♘xc4 ♗xf1 18 ♗xf1 and despite Fritz's pleas to the contrary, I think White is much better. His minor pieces have lots of scope and Black's pawns are by no means threatening.

13 h3 *(D)*

This is virtually forced because if I'm allowed to play ...♕d7 my position will fit together extremely well. I had originally intended 13...♗e6 here, when I hoped that h3 could later be shown to be a weakness, without really believing that it would. I flirted with 13...♗h5, tempted by the fact that 14 g4 ♗xg4 was promising, but the bishop on h5 is always a liability and I didn't like having it there. As I was considering these options, it occurred to me that almost all my pieces were already where they wanted to be. This made me wonder if I could make use of their positioning immediately, and suddenly my eyes fell upon an extremely seductive possibility. Given that White is fully mobilized and has no particular weaknesses, I didn't fully believe it, but after a ten-minute look at some variations I saw no absolutely clear-cut refutation – only promising complications and a lot of fun.

13...e4!??!

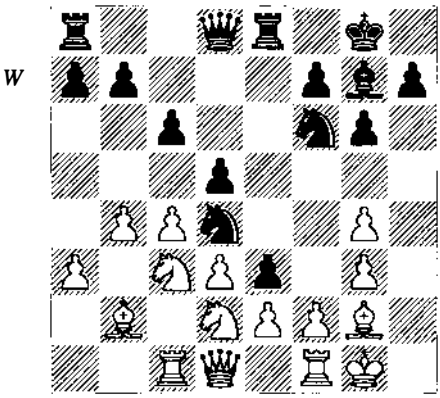
Just over a decade ago, IM Mark Condie and I began to wonder whether the secret to success in chess was simply to go relentlessly forward with the pieces and to prefer sacrifices to retreat on principle. Now I realize that this approach is too limited for chess's multi-faceted geometry, but occasionally it's worth thinking about, and quite exhilarating to try.

14 hxg4

Not a mistake as such, but White misses his first, and perhaps easiest, opportunity to punish me for my extravagance: 14 dxe4! dxe4 (14...♘xe4 15 ♘dxe4 ♘xe2+ 16 ♘xe2 ♗xb2 17 hxg4 ♗xc1 18 cxd5 cxd5 19 ♕xd5! leaves White in control) seems to help Black, because White no longer has counterplay based on capturing on d5 at the right moment. However, 15 hxg4 e3 16 ♘de4! shows a crucial benefit of removing Black's d5-pawn. I don't think either player considered 16...♘xg4 carefully at the time, but Black seems to be causing enough confusion not to reject 13...e4 out of hand, even

if White has lots of ways to prove an advantage with a little care. After the implausible line 17 f3 (17 f4!?) 17...♘f2 18 ♘xf2? (18 ♕e1! ♘xe4 19 ♘xe4 f5 20 ♗xd4 ♗xd4 21 ♘c3 a5 22 b5 ♕d6 gives Black only 'punting' chances in a lost position) 18...♘xe2+ 19 ♘xe2 exf2+ 20 ♖xf2 ♗xb2 21 ♖b1 ♕xd1+ 22 ♖xd1 ♗xa3 23 ♖b1 a5! an unclear endgame is in prospect.

14...e3! *(D)*



The point behind 13...e4: White has no easy access to this important square, and his kingside pawn-shield is being stripped away.

15 fxe3

White keeps grabbing. The quieter lines give Black a lot of options and good chances of generating serious threats; e.g., 15 ♘f3 ♘xg4; 15 ♘b3 exf2+ 16 ♖xf2 ♘xg4; 15 ♘db1 exf2+ 16 ♖xf2 ♘xg4. Black is at least OK in all these lines. Note that as well as White's weakened kingside, the unprotected bishop on b2 and the threat of ...♘xe2+ are recurring themes.

15...♘xg4 16 exd4?

It turns out that this was the moment where White could counter-sacrifice and beat off the attack, 'beyond reasonable doubt'. That said, the lines are by no means simple. 16 ♘xd5! and now:

a) 16...♘xe3 17 ♘xe3 ♖xe3 (17...♕g5 18 ♗xd4 ♗xd4 19 ♔h2 ♖xe3 20 ♘f3 ♕h5+ 21 ♗h3 and White's heart rate can begin to slow down) 18 ♖f2 ♕e7 19 ♘e4 f5 20 ♕d2! and White wins.

b) 16...cxd5 17 ♗xd4 ♗xd4 18 exd4 and now 18...♕g5 may look a little scary for White in the mind's eye over the board, but on reflection Black's attack looks fairly bogus. 19 ♖f4, for example, leaves Black without a convincing continuation. Black cannot improve; e.g., 18...♘e3 19 ♕e1 dxc4 20 ♘xc4 ♘xf1 21 ♕xf1 ♕xd4+ 22 ♕f2 winning for White, or 18...dxc4 19 ♖xc4 ♘e3 20 ♕b3 and lovely though Black's knight is, it doesn't quite compensate for a whole piece and a pawn.

Neither player saw these variations very clearly. In any case, during the game it is important not to exhaust yourself by thinking about the 'objective' correctness of your ideas. It is much more effective to accept that neither player will see everything, and hope that you make fewer mistakes than your opponent.

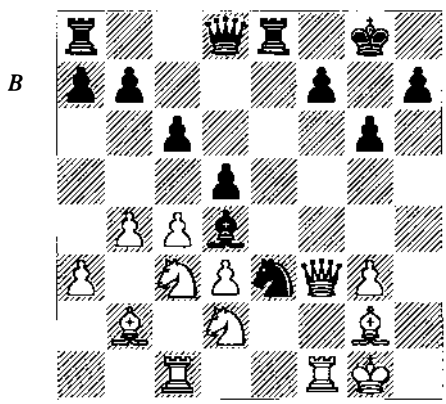
16...♗xd4+ 17 e3

After 17 ♔h1?, 17...♖e5! ends all resistance. The four attacking pieces are too much to appease: 18 ♗h3 (18 ♘f3 ♖h5+ 19 ♘h4 ♖xh4+) 18...♖h5 19 ♔g2 ♘e3+.

17...♘xe3!

17...♗xe3+ 18 ♔h1 ♕g5 19 ♘f3 ♕h6+ 20 ♘h4 is good for White.

18 ♕f3 *(D)*



Now I used up a big chunk of time because there are lots of interesting options, all of which are hard to assess. I think the position is genuinely unclear here, and for all practical purposes it can still go either way.

18...♘xf1+?

I wasn't too eager to swap this wonderful horse but I couldn't see a convincing alternative. However, 18...♘f5+ was better. After 19 ♔h2

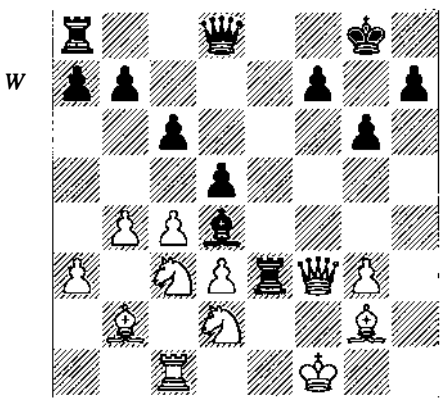
♖e3 I thought that White would probably have a good counter-sacrifice. However, a closer look suggests that Black's attack is enduring.

a) 20 cxd5 ♕g5!! (20...♖xf3 21 ♘xf3 is not so clear). I didn't see this at the time – I guess I fell prey to *Materialism* but it's not easy to see moves other than taking the queen! After 21 ♕f4 ♕h5+ 22 ♗h3 ♖xg3 23 ♕xg3 ♘xg3 24 ♖fe1 ♗e5 Black has a winning attack.

b) 20 ♕f4 ♗e5 21 ♕xe5!? looked scary, but mainly because I was in no mood to defend; I guess it's not so clear after 21...♖xe5 22 ♘xd5 ♖e6 23 ♘f4 ♕g5!, when I still have a big attack; e.g., 24 ♘e4 ♖xe4 25 dxe4 ♕xg3+ 26 ♔g1 ♘e3.

Alternatively, 18...♘xc4+ is possible. After 19 ♔h2 ♘e5!? 20 ♕e2 (20 ♕f4 ♗e3!! 21 ♕xe3? ♘g4+) 20...f5 White cannot hold on to the queen, but it looks like Black's attack is withering. In any case, 19 ♔h1!? is simpler, when I have to play 19...♘xb2 and the best that can be said about my position is that it's playable.

19 ♔xf1 ♖e3 *(D)*



20 ♕f4?

For some reason neither player seemed to see 20 ♕g4! at all. I suppose this has something to do with the 'emotional memory' of the marauding knight on e3. After 20...dxc4 (20...♖xd3 21 ♘f3 doesn't look great for Black either; for instance, 21...♕f6 22 ♘xd5!) 21 ♘xc4 ♖xd3, on a pure point-count, Black is only one down, but that misses the point! I don't have enough play here, and once White gains the initiative, the extra pieces will cause a lot of trouble.

20...♖xd3 21 ♔e2?

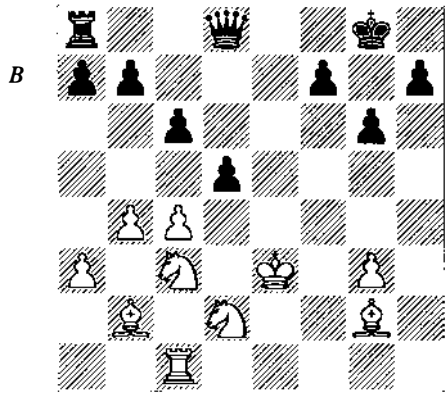
Maybe the losing move.

21 cxd5? g5! wins for Black, but 21 ♘d1 is still highly unclear. Black's best then seems to be 21...g5 22 ♕xd4 ♖xd4 23 ♗xd4 dxc4, when we have a highly unusual material balance. If White can organize himself, then the four minor pieces are no laughing matter, but it looks as though Black can keep enough initiative to hold the balance at least. After 24 ♗c3 ♕d3+ 25 ♔g1 ♖e8 the position is hard to call; there are chances for both sides.

21...♗e3!

This took Colin by surprise, and he was now quite seriously short of time. Problems in the Time dimension are particularly serious given that my queen is about to run riot over the white position. Moreover, the less time you have, the more confusing it is to have so many pieces to move!

22 ♕xe3 ♖xe3+ 23 ♔xe3 *(D)*



23...♕g5+!

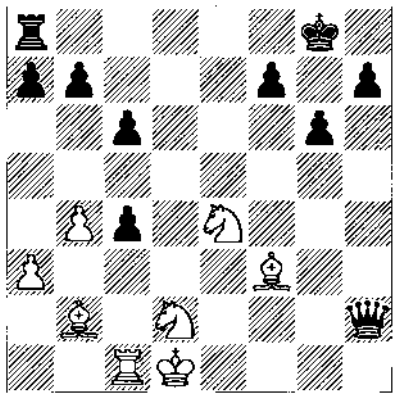
An important move, preferring to keep the initiative than to win a piece back. 23...d4+ 24 ♔f2 dxc3 25 ♗xc3 is almost certainly not worse for Black because White's king is still exposed, but it looks playable, and eminently survivable for White, even with so little time.

24 ♔e2 ♕xg3 25 ♗f3 dxc4

Committal, but correct. White cannot hold his pieces together and the open d-file turns out to be more relevant than the e4-square.

26 ♘ce4 ♕h2+ 27 ♔d1 *(D)*

27 ♘f2 ♖e8+ 28 ♔f1 ♕f4 29 ♖c2 c3 30 ♗xc3 ♖e3 crack!

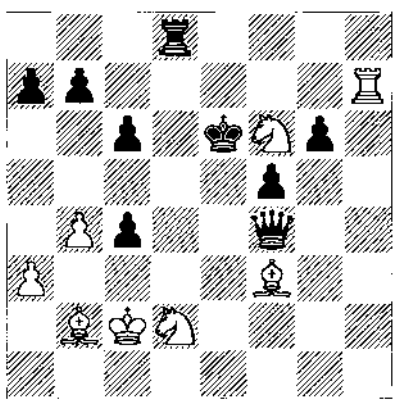


27...♖d8?

Time-trouble takes its toll. 27...f5! 28 ♘f6+ ♔f7 is much stronger: White is totally lost because he has no counterplay and cannot coordinate his army.

28 ♔c2 h5!?

This looks too cautious, but may not be. I guess being so short of time I had an emotional reaction to the combination of ♘f6+ and ♖h1-h7 when suddenly my king is under fire, but a cooler look suggests that Black should be OK: 28...f5 29 ♖h1 ♕f4 30 ♘f6+ ♔f7 31 ♖xh7+ ♔e6 *(D)* when you are surprised that you have not been mated and start to feel relieved.

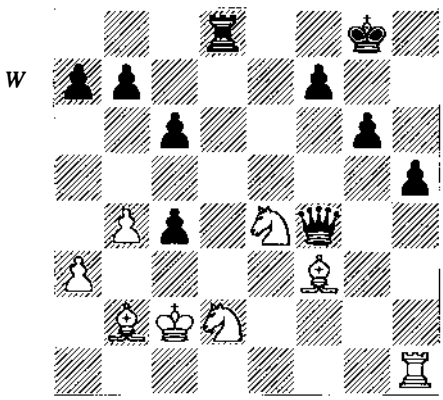


But then you see 32 ♘de4! and chaos reigns once more. We have a feast of geometric delights. This is the sort of position where I would almost certainly lose on time through sheer bewilderment. However, order can be restored: 32...fxe4 33 ♗g4+ ♔d6 34 ♘e8+! ♔d5 (34...♖xe8?? 35 ♖d7#!) 35 ♘f6+ ♔d6 36 ♘e8+ and it's a draw!

29 ♖h1

29 ♘f6+ ♔f8 30 ♘h7+ ♔e7 (30...♔g8 draws, but that would hardly be consistent with my earlier play!) 31 ♗f6+ ♔d7 32 ♖h1 ♕f4 with a mess – even when White takes on d8 it's anyone's game. It won't be easy to organize the pieces with so many pawns and so many potential checks.

29...♕f4 *(D)*



30 ♖e1?

The final and decisive error.

30 ♘f6+! is still unclear; e.g., 30...♔f8 31 ♘h7+ ♔e8!? (31...♔g8) 32 ♘f6+ ♔e7 33 ♖e1+ ♔d6? 34 ♗e5+! ♕xe5 35 ♘xc4+! (an easy idea to miss!) 35...♔e6 36 ♘xe5 and White wins.

30...f5! 31 ♗c3 fxe4 32 ♗e2

32 ♗xe4 is better but 32...♕f2 33 ♖d1 g5 still looks winning for Black.

32...b5 33 ♖f1 ♕h2 34 ♖e1 ♕g2 35 ♔c1 e3 36 ♘xc4 0-1

Colin's flag fell before completing this move, but it's over now anyway; e.g., 36...bxc4 37 ♗xc4+ ♔h7 and White has nothing.

The above game highlights that you don't have to play perfectly to create something memorable; you just need the presence of mind to stretch yourself a little and 'think differently' when it matters. The point of 'thinking differently about Black and White', not merely in the opening, but at all stages of the game, is to keep

us in contact with the vitality of chess, so that we don't make the mistake of taking our wonderful game for granted. *Chess for Zebras* has explored a variety of chess-related issues, and I hope that these explorations have succeeded as a means to achieving a much greater end: enriching the rewarding human experience at the heart of the game.

The book began with zebras and so it shall end. I recently 'Googled' 'Chess for Zebras' to check the online advert for this book, and was intrigued to find a link titled "Why can't Zebras play Chess?" I clicked on the link and earnestly followed the instructions on the relevant website. I had to solve a basic logic puzzle before the hidden answers to this pivotal question were revealed to me.

Apparently there are three reasons that Zebras can't play chess:

1) Zebras cannot accept being just 'White' or 'Black'.

2) Zebras do not acknowledge the existence of 'checks' (only stripes).

3) Zebras hate horses and therefore refuse to move their knights.

If only zebras could think differently.

Endnotes

1 I believe this advice applies at all levels of play, but the kinds of positions you think about, and what you think about them will vary according to your level of play. Chess is a concrete game, but the stronger you become the more strategic considerations predominate. However, I agree with the advice of FM Ken Smith who said that until you are about 1800 (if you are trying to improve your results) "your first name is tactics, your middle name is tactics and your last name is tactics". That said, if your aim is not just gaining rating points but deepening your appreciation of the game, then you shouldn't deprive yourself of the aspects of chess that you enjoy more. For players rated below 1800 who desperately want to improve (and are willing to suffer for it!) I recommend Michael de la Maza's thoughtful and honest book, *Rapid Chess Improvement* (Everyman 2002).

2 What do I mean by 'real thinking'? I mean looking at chess positions without rushing to judgement about what is happening. I mean thinking that does not involve following 'recipes' but rather following, as far as possible, the logic of the position in front of you. This is highly non-trivial and may not even be possible, but it should be attempted by anybody trying to improve.

3 Many players 'work' on their chess as if they were working on an academic subject, but improving your chess is much more like improving your driving, or improving your play on a musical instrument, than it is like preparing for an exam. Such improvement can therefore be directed and supervised, but not directly 'taught'.

4 While writing this paragraph, I am reminded of the drawing of lots at Hastings 2003. All the participants of the round-robin had to pick up pieces from a chocolate chess set and check whether there was a number underneath. After several moves, when everyone had a number for the draw, it turned out that I was due to be playing Black vs Peter Heine Nielsen. We were then invited to eat the pieces. I went straight for the white king without any conscious intent. Somebody suggested that this act was a little 'Freudian'. Stuart Conquest added that after eating the white king, I should hide the white chocolate queen in my jacket, and take her back to my hotel room!

5 To be precise, the problem is not so much with understanding, but the fact that understanding is associated with "understanding how chess should be played". I would have nothing against 'understanding' if it meant "understanding how to play chess". The distinction seems subtle, but they are completely different things.

6 For the record, I also have a tendency to move knights backwards before I move them forwards. So if I want to get a knight from f3 to d3, I always start off by thinking of ♘e1-d3, long before I realize that I can go via the much more useful square, e5.

7 There are plenty of sources out there, but you can also train with a 'DIY' approach: Flick through the recent top games from TWIC and put anything that grabs your attention in a database marked 'training positions'. Then go to the points in the game where the position seemed to change significantly, set that position up on a real board, and try to make sense of it yourself. I tend to select

positions and games that confuse me in some way at first glance; e.g., Svidler-Leko, Dortmund 2005. I thought Black was doing well and then suddenly he was lost, so I set up the position where it looked 'promising' and looked for improvements. It turns out that Black was probably never doing particularly well, but I gained much more from working that out for myself than I would have done by reading an annotation to that effect.

8 In the discussion that follows I use the term 'concept' in places where 'percept', 'category', 'guideline' or 'idea' might be more precise. I concede that the use of this term is problematic, but this book is designed to help chess-players rather than to impress philosophers, so I have taken some liberties accordingly.

9 I would be particularly interested to examine the relationship between adult players trying to improve their chess and adults trying to learn a second language. In both cases we use our natural language to make sense of the new material, and this prevents us from picking up on contextual details that are crucial to a more fluent grasp of a language, or indeed of chess.

10 I began to sense that there might be a fruitful connection between chess 'vision' and 'cognitive load' while conducting research at Harvard University. I recorded ten graduate students trying to solve a fiendishly difficult logic/insight puzzle and found that success was relative to the subjects' ability to manage cognitive load. Those who came closest to solving the puzzle broke it up into a few constituent parts, thought productively about those parts and tried to find relationships between those parts in an effort to get closer to the solution. Those who made little or no headway either felt overwhelmed by the complexity of the puzzle and didn't know how to proceed, or created a mental model of the puzzle that did not help them to reduce cognitive load. (Rowson 2003, "What colour is my face? Why cognitive load makes insight ineffable." Year-long project for HT-100: Cognition, Education, and the developing brain.)

11 Grandmasters are not creatures from another planet. I am creating this dichotomy between GMs and others purely to create an instructive contrast, rather than to suggest that there is something 'special' about the thought-processes of GMs. GMs also have to make use of imperfect 'concepts', and words also get in the way of our thoughts sometimes. However, I do feel that there is something about having a relatively 'abstract' visual image that allows you, paradoxically, to think about that image more clearly, and operate on it more effectively.

12 Hübner (personal communication, 2005) makes the point that 'dimension' is a misleading word because it should apply to the different directions of physical extension (up-down, left-right, etc.) but is often used more casually to mean 'element' or 'factor'. I take the point, but am not troubled by it!

13 Please note that the analogy does not imply equivalence. The serve in tennis is certainly more significant, but while the degree of the advantage differs, the nature of the advantage is similar.

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